

SANDS OF TIME

40 YEARS IN THE SHADOW GOVERNMENT
VOLUME II: THE TEMPUS FUGIT CHRONICLES



VOLUME II

"A STUNNING EPIC MASTERPIECE!"

SEAN DAVID MORTON

BASED ON AN AMAZING TRUE STORY

For
15th

Future

Dr. San. Patel

2015

PRAISE, ADULATIONS AND EXALTATIONS FOR
SANDS OF TIME

"EPIC" "HISTORIC AND SWEEPING" "WOW" "GRIPPING" "FANTASTIC" "A
TOTAL THRILL RIDE" "STUPENDOUS" "JUST AWESOME" "GLORIOUS" "A
BEHIND THE SCENES MEMOIR FROM A MAN IN BLACK!" "GRIPPING"
"IT FREAKED ME OUT!" "JUST GREAT" "TRULY WONDROUS!"

"I was one of Sean-David Morton's biggest fans from his days on Coast To Coast AM long before we met when I took the Job at USC Since then I have come to know what a truly special and dynamic person he is Sands of Time is just one more example of his drive to get the real truth out to the world, and he has done it like he has done everything else in his life With style and a smile Extraordinary stuff "

~Pete Carroll~

Head Coach, Super Bowl Champion Seattle Seahawks

*

"I have been involved in top secret government projects for most of my life I cannot believe Sean David Morton has the courage and sheer guts to finally publish the whole truth about everything that has gone down in the last 40 years SANDS OF TIME is not just a fantastic, spellbinding read, It IS a scientifically accurate and truly historic document of what, someday, will be told to Mankind as the true history of this planet"

-The Late Dr. Fred Bell-

Death of Ignorance, Rays of Truth & Crystals of Light, Inside Track

"I was one of Sean-David Morton's biggest fans from his days on Coast To Coast AM long before we met when I took the Job at USC Since then I have come to know what a truly special and dynamic person he is Sands of Time is just one more example of his drive to get the real truth out to the world, and he has done it like he has done everything else in his -

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"SANDS will change the worlds of physics and science We have all suspected this black arcane world of super-science has existed Just behind the scenes Sean Morton finally pulls back the curtain "

-Richard C Hoagland-Author Dark Mission, Pyramids of Mars-

*

"Goddamn If this wasn't the best thing I have read in years "

-Jim Marrs-Auth9r of ALIEN AGENDA

*

"You will never be the same after being pulled into this world"

-Kerry Cassidy-Project Camelot

*

"Poetics, government conspiracy, UFOs, super-tech, action, adventure, SANDS OF TIME quite simply has got It all, written in a superb style that hits you in the head, heart and the guts all at once!" Ce' Bravo, Sean-David"

~Dannion Brinkley~ "Saved By The Light"

"Something this genius deserves a TV mini-series. It is the true history of America's science and technology which has been criminally hidden from us for over 70 years. Let's just hope its revealed in time to save us!"

Jackie Stander- Stander & Associates Productions

*

"OFF THE HOOK! It blows the lid off everything and proves what so many have suspected for so long. I didn't want it to end! Now I can't wait for the sequel! It answered so many questions about well everything!"

" Dr.Susan Shumsky-Author of "Ascension"

*

"Sean-David Morton has become the fantastic new master of the intelligent, modern day, conspiracy thriller. Sean, the first to film AREA 51 and drag it screaming out of the shadows into our global consciousness, has done it again with SANDS OF TIME. The revolutionary science presented here will change our lives, but I guarantee that after you read this book you will never look at our world, or our universe, the same way again!" Rick Barber-National Radio Host. KOA RADIO*

"SANDS OF TIME was one of those books that I wanted to shout from the roof-tops 'you GOTTA READ THIS!' It was so gripping and compelling that it made real for the first time the world that I have been telling people for years existed beyond the media and beyond the government. If this book breaks out it could totally change the game as we know it!

I am buying a case to give every single one of my friends."
CHRISTIE APHRODITE~Hostesof TRUTH BRIGADE RADIO

*

"Sean-David Morton has been telling it like it is for so many years and *SANDS OF TIME* puts it all in one place. He explains the 'conspiracy' that we have all long suspected, but from the other side of the mirror. Who would have thought the life story of a Man In Black, who shepherded so many dark government projects, would be so compelling?"

Kimberly Jagger- Radio Hostess

*

"Sean-David Morton has been my friend and the top speaker at my Expos in New York for going on 23 years now. Being in the New Age business for most of my life, I have met hundreds of metaphysical speakers and "gurus" and Sean is the only one that truly 'walks the walk' and doesn't just 'talk the talk'. The dedication and devotion of his fans is truly something. He is a genius and awe inspiring speaker.

Who knew he was a genius writer as well? This book is just fantastic!"

Mark Becker-Producer/Owner, The New Life Expo

*

SANDS OF TIME

BASED ON AN INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY

Other Books To Love by

Sean-David Morton

SANDS OF TIME

VOLUME ONE in
THE TEMPUS FUGIT CHRONICLES

BLACK SERAPH

(Book I in *The Black Seraph Chronicles*)

VEIL OF THE ANTI-CHRIST (Book II
in *The Black Seraph Chronicles*)

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO ASTRAL TRAVEL

THE PSYCHIC GAMBLER'S GUIDE

THE VATRA CHRONICLES THE

GULF BREEZE PROPHEESIES THE

MILLENIUM FACTOR

THE DELPHI ASSOCIATES NEWSLETTER Vol. 1-12

(Published monthly from April 1993 to January 2009. R.I.P.)

A complete list of books, materials, lectures, videos, spiritual excursions and radio show information and previews of upcoming projects and events is available at www.SeanDavidMorton.com.

SANDS OF TIME

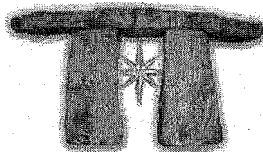
VOLUME II

BASED ON AN INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY

A NOVEL

SEAN-DAVID MORTON

STARLOCKE PUBLISHING



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SANDS OF TIME

Book II in *The Tempus Fugit Chronicles*

By Sean-David Morton

**SANDS OF TIME:
BOOK 2 in THE TEMPUS FUGIT CHRONICLES
VOLUME II**

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Dr. Sean-David Morton, PhD, et al.

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Character names have been changed to protect living relatives and active personnel.

All referenced history is real, correct and exhaustively researched, and names of various real leaders, political figures, locations, research projects, cutting edge science, technology and mathematical equations are used.

Dedications

The author wishes to thank his darling and devoted wife,

Melissa,

*without whose love, caring, grace and infinite patience,
this book would never have seen the light of day.*

*Without your hard work, dedication and perseverance,
nothing would ever get done.*

I love you deeply and beyond words.

Thank you for sharing this crazy, dangerous journey with me.

*And to all the unsung heroes, those brave men and women have
labored in the dark for so many years on every Above Top Secret,
Classified Black Operations government project and program,
working to protect us*

*from all threats "Foreign" and Domestic. Know that this book,
in some small way, shows what you have all
been through to protect our country and our world.*

*Thanks to your efforts, someday soon, peace and love will reign
throughout the galaxy.*

Let us all Pray that day comes soon.

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago a powerful, mysterious man approached the author. He had lived virtually all his life as a top director and high-level scientist involved in the Above Top Secret "Black World" of shadow government projects and research. He said he admired the service of the author in his undaunted quest to bring the truth to light and began a feed of crucial in-side information to be released to the public.

When certain circumstances presented themselves he wanted to get the truth out to the world, "Before it was too late", as our planet was, he said, "In grave danger!" But he could only tell the whole story after he had "moved on" to use his exact words.

Two years ago his estate made available documents that are the basis for the book you now hold, this only being done with the express contractual agreement that these memoirs change the names to protect his still living family and active personnel.

So, after decades of silence, a truly remarkable tale can finally be told. This story explains and clarifies practically all the mysteries researchers have struggled with for years, putting all the puzzle pieces together of Dark Science, Black Ops and Secret Government conspiracies that have baffled those seeking the truth for many years.

I hope this will shed light on these for everyone.

I also present the completed Unified Field Theory upon which much of this remarkable science is based. I now have a pending US Patent and Trademark and on this equation, which I hope will benefit the right people. Call it a gift to mankind from our friends in the future as a preparation for the coming shifts.

The story you are about to read is true. There are still forces out there that would literally stop at nothing to silence anyone who comes forward with what you are about to experience. They have already worked to savagely smear this author. But the persons, places, underground bases, projects, science, history, events and experiments are all frighteningly real.

SANDS OF Time was novelized from the original notes for your enlightenment and entertainment, and for the author's additional protection, so "The Powers That Be" will not find it necessary to put a bullet through the author's head. This will allow you to write this all off as a quaint little "science fiction fantasy fairy tale" if you so desire. So Be It.

I assure you it is not.

SANDS OF TIME

VOLUME II



SEAN-DAVID MORTON

THE STORY SO FAR...

The story begins as we meet our hero and experience the incredible true adventures of Dr. Theodore "Ted" Humphrey, Jr. as a young man. When his parents divorce, he is ripped from an idyllic life as a fast-lane teenager in Southern California in the 1950s and uprooted and displaced to Barstow, California, with all the glitz and glamour that implies. Trapped there with his bizarre and reclusive scientist father Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Sr., Ted, Jr. plays football and occasionally helps out his eccentric father in his secret laboratory behind their ramshackle desert house.

After a victory in the football State Championship, Ted Sr. makes a rare appearance at the after game team dinner. It is here that Dr. Humphrey has an eerie encounter with a woman from his past disguised as a waitress that shakes him to his core. (We learn later she is one of our villains, Anne Corbett, a woman with the ability to move in and out of the Time/Space continuum.)

Returning home, the Doctor tells his son Ted he must go out, but bids him a tearful good-bye. The Doctor then disappears into the night. Ted finds a mysterious envelope his father left behind, with a letter of acceptance and a full-ride scholarship to USC. Also, instructions that he is to sell the house and put the money in a trust for his future.

The next morning Ted is awakened by the local Sheriff and questioned about the disappearance of his father, whose car they find abandoned on the roadside with footprints in the reddish desert sands leading...nowhere.!

There is a note in the car to Ted, Jr. from his father saying he must "Go away for a very long time ... but we will see each other again ...someday!"

All Ted was bequeathed by his now vanished father are four leather bound volumes of his scientific laboratory notes, which, he is told by his father, he will need "someday!"

Ted graduates from USC and attends grad school at Cal Tech, Pasadena. There he's brought on to work on a revolutionary new rocket formula. In the course of this work he is interviewed by the mysterious Dr. Leonard Bates, who works in the "Dark World" of government Shadow Projects at places like Camp Hero in Montauk, New York.

Late that night in the lab, Ted is totally stuck on the equations for the rocket fuel with no hope in sight in a dead-end that could end his career. A black janitor comes in to sweep the floors, looks at the equations, erases a few phrases, writes a few more, and, with a huge grin, solves it all and disappears.

With the equation solved, Ted for the first time, opens his dad's journals and begins to make sense of his father's research into the very heart and nature of TIME. He also sees references throughout the journals to a woman named "Ann Corbett" who, Ted remembers, was the "Waitress" at the diner the night his father disappeared.

Ted is awarded his PhD, but everything he has done is immediately classified and taken over by the Feels, never to see the light of day.

In a rage, Ted quits, making the fateful decision to take Dr. Leonard Bates up on his offer. He moves to upstate New York, and joins the legendary Black World operation known only as The Montauk Project.

Ted meets Bates' secretary-the fantastically efficient and wonderfully delicious gum-snapping sassy platinum blonde Miss Sally Jennings, who, we learn, is secretly Dr. Bates' daughter.

The Montauk Project centers around a gigantic three-ringed machine, nicked-named THE BEAST using enormous electro-magnetic energies to teleport objects through space and time. But no one seems to get the device to work correctly.

Ted falls for Sally in a big way, they get engaged and the wedding will happen after the tests are successfully completed.

The "Higher Ups" give Ted's team one last chance to prove it can all work before funding is pulled. After some nasty intrigue, Ted essentially replaces Bates as head of the project.

Ted tosses the Hail Mary pass and gets the entire experiment to work! But there is a huge side effect: it creates a massive temporal time field distortion. A young Marine is caught in the effect as time STOPS in the area around the test. Thinking quickly, Ted manages to rescue the Marine and bring him out of the Time Stream, making him the first American, on May 19, 1962, to travel in time.

Leonard Bates is more than upset! Now that Ted has successfully done what The Higher Ups, known as Majestic 12, want, they will NEVER let him go! Bates doesn't want to see his beloved daughter Sally go down with him! In a raging rant, Bates comes clean about it all: That the Germans and Americans had been working with evil races of ETs from the beginning. That they'd all been tricked into "ripping holes" in a fence set up long ago to protect Earth from invasion by these same malevolent beings. That Bates and Ted's father had been key to all those programs. Now Earth was being invaded from at least two different dimensions, and all this equipment was really designed to PLUG the holes in that fence, and stop the invasion.

Bates is found dead, obviously murdered, badly beaten; with a hose running from the tail pipe of his car up through the window. It is outrageously ruled a suicide.

Ted is then called to New York City to meet with the mysterious group known as: MAJESTIC-12. Ted thinks he'll be hailed as a hero but, instead, these mystery men for pulling such a stupendously stupid stunt castigate him for his foolhardiness.

Ted is finished. His career, and possibly his life, is now in dire, mortal danger as Ted returns to Montauk with seemingly nowhere else to turn.

Ted, now desperate and very alone, contemplates his fate during breakfast at the Montauk Cafe. A large, impressive and meticulously

dressed Afro-American named Max approaches Ted knowing all about his current situation. Max comes with an offer of a new life.

Max takes him to a magnificent yacht, which casts off for parts unknown, and onboard he meets Admiral Jacobs who offers Ted his new life and welcomes him to the next "Inner Circle" of secrecy in the "Black World."

Jacobs backs up most of what Bates related: That the Philadelphia Experiment in 1943 and a device found crashed in Germany's Black Forest in the 1930s called the Nazi Bell had both ripped huge holes in the fabric of our universe. Now our Time/Space continuum was being invaded from two different directions leading to what might be a mass invasion in the future.

Dr. Hans Kammler found that the Nazi Bell was part of an Alien spacecraft but managed to figure out how to not only tear open the holes in our Universe, but also, how to close them. Kammler also, possibly, figured out how to use the gravity waves the Bell produced to travel through time.

It was also believed that one of the most evil of the Nazi scientists, our main villain, Dr. Simon Ratterman, used The Bell to escape the impenetrable facility and was now loose in the time stream and working for the Invaders.

Kammler, now a prisoner, had been handed back and forth between the Russians and the Americans since 1945 to work on a number of programs parsing out just enough information to keep himself useful and alive. Kammler also worked extensively with Ted's father on time travel and teleportation. Now he was held at a top-secret Russian submarine base off the coast of Iceland.

Ted's mission is to go to Mt. Grace in the Arctic Circle, interrogate Kammler, and get his equations on time travel and how to close the rips in the Time/Space continuum and end the invasion of our universe. Ted takes the mission.

Ted is now marooned as the only American "advisor" on a Top-Secret Russian submarine base during the very height of The Cold War. Should Ted's mission succeed he is given a small gun, a key that unlocks the gate to a cove with a small boat, and a code for a special phone that will call a US forces to his rescue.

Now he must deal everyday with Kammler; a monstrous but brilliant Nazi scientist that holds the key to life and death over all mankind. Everyone on the base is a spy watching Ted's every move.

But it's here Ted meets the brilliant, beautiful and deadly USSR Navy Captain Irina Tolsky, a graduate of Moscow University with a Masters in Theoretical Physics and fluent in four languages. Ted and Irina become romantically involved with Kammler as their mutual enemy.

Kammler gives Ted more clues regarding the work he did with his father, and how the evil Dr. Simon Ratterman used their experiments to escape their prison and run loose in the time stream. But Kammler also warns Ted that anyone getting these equations could teleport bombs into any place or capital undetected, or worse, change the very nature and flow of TIME itself! Kammler refused to give it to Hitler as the war was winding down, because he knew the Nazi High Command would use it to destroy the world rather than go down in flames.

Finally, after months in this isolated frozen hell, Ted wears Kammler clown and gets him to give him the final completed equations that Ted needs. In exchange for the equations, Ted gives the old Nazi the only honorable way out: allowing him to commit suicide.

But Ted is found out by the KGB officer watching him. They learn Ted has the equations he needs, and rather than let him escape the island with what he knows, they set a Russian submarine's nuclear missiles to detonate inside the hanger bay, taking Ted, the Russians, the base and the entire Island with them.

Ted and Irina fight their way out, killing people they had thought were friends along the way.

The USS SHARK, the fastest sub in the fleet, receives special orders from "on high" that Ted must be rescued at "all costs." The sub practically melts its nuclear engines desperately fighting through the worst Arctic storm in 100 years, trying to get to Ted in time.

Meanwhile, Ted and Irina, both badly wounded, manage to make their way onto the rescue skiff, and miraculously manage to pull into a protected harbor.

The Shark, badly damaged, rescues them in the nick of time but now must flee the nuclear detonation of the island.

Ted and Irina regain consciousness in a Glasgow, Scotland hospital. Max is there. The Shark is ruined and Mt. Grace has been blown to Kingdom Come without a trace.

Admiral Jacobs is called on the carpet by MAJESTIC-12, demanding an explanation as to "how this whole operation got so completely out of hand?" He calmly explains that the fate of our world lies in Ted Humphrey's hands and after all he had accomplished, he should not be trifled with.

While in the hospital, Ted receives a mysterious Visitor, but in, and from, a dimension "out of phase" with this reality and our time-space continuum. Speaking to him with a thick German accent from a darkened corner, just outside of his line of sight. Though he claims to "mean no harm," we discover later this is the villainously evil Nazi scientist Dr. Simon Ratterman, who worked with both Kammler and Ted's father. Pretending to be Ted's "friend and guide," we discover later all the traps that he is setting for Ted to thwart any and all of his future research and actions.

While he has the time, Ted begins to furiously update his notes with Kammler's added equations and insight and gets all the paperwork back to

Jacobs in Washington DC to keep the higher-ups off Jacobs' back and to show his mission was a success.

Ted and Irina get married.

Jacobs gets all of Ted's paperwork to his staff of scientists, and the very impossibility of the physics drives them all mad! It is the most brilliant and groundbreaking science they have ever seen, but a major part of the formula is MISSING! The part inside Ted's head he keeps as the next big black chip on the poker table to use in his own power game to climb the ladder in the Black World and bring him one more step closer to solving the mystery of what happened to his dad.

Ted and Irina return to Washington DC and meet with Jacobs and Max where Ted uses his "big black chips" now being the only one that can make all of this work to become the head of a vast new project located at the legendary AREA 51.

A phone rings during their meeting from "The Man Upstairs" known only as *BOSS ONE*. He orders Jacobs to make it all happen.

The Humphrey family sets up in Las Vegas while Ted settles into his new job at Five One. But there is cause for further joy, as Irina is now pregnant with their new baby girl, Pasha!

At Area 51 Ted is introduced to nine Alien craft captured by PROJECT: POUNCE. Ted takes a special interest in one ship he nicknames THE SPORT MODEL.

These craft have stumped every other scientist. After an intuitive flash, Ted is able to open the craft and climbs in. Ted presses a few buttons and floats to the top of the hanger and gently lands a few seconds later. When he gets out, all hell has broken loose, as Ted has disappeared for 22 hours. He learns these ships not only have the ability to travel through SPACE, but more importantly, the ability to move through and bend TIME *ITSELF!*

Ted gets a panicked phone call from Irina to meet at a diner near the base. She is armed and terrified. Irina got a visit from Dr. Simon

Ratterman, who has not aged a DAY since working with Ted's father in the 1940s. And he came bearing gifts: a Plexiglas plate overlay for the Sport Model Ted has just tested, complete with all the Alien symbols. Irina has also drawn a number of disturbing pictures she's Remote Viewed, that all connect to Ted's work at Five-One.

In a panic, Ted calls for a protection team to get them back to the base, and as soon as they leave, the team is attacked. The diner explodes, as well as several cars in the convoy and they all barely make it back to Five-One alive.

Ted confronts Max, who was meeting with two members of "*The Committee*" when the attack happened. Ted pulls out Irina's drawings, one of which shows Max meeting with these two "Committee" members... who are not human! We learn Max is the traitor who's been double crossing everyone by feeding information on all their projects to his Alien Masters, who promised him power and advancement.

Then the probe in Max's head explodes causing a cerebral hemorrhage, and he dies horribly.

Irina decides she has had enough and packs her bags, collects their daughter, and flees back to Russia.

Back at the base Ted gets another "Out of Phase" visit from Ratterman, who says he had nothing to do with the explosions or Max's death and just wanted to make sure he got the dashboard control plate for the Sport Model saucer. Ratterman then explains his version of the coming conflict the Earth faces:

"There are two great houses in the Universe. Each seeks dominion over the other and all the subjugated worlds they possess. But there are rules to be obeyed...as the conquest of planets can only be done by compromise and acceptance. Today, our world... has fallen under the desirous eye of the minions of the great houses.

"So, because of these far distant projects (the Nazi Bell, The Montauk Project, the Philadelphia Experiment, and Ted, Sr. travelling in time) they

all ripped holes in the fabric of time to the point we could no longer repair them, with each group doing some degree of damage to the cloak surrounding this planet. Our Little Earth, with our rich genetic resources of races and flora and fauna, became known to many orders of and groups wanting to bring us under their control. The story is as old as the Universe. Power, control and those that rule and those that serve."

With that Dr. Simon Ratterman vanishes back in between the seconds of the clock leaving Ted to wonder if this old Nazi loose in the Time Stream, with unlimited access to our most highly classified and secure facilities, is friend or foe.

Returning home Ted has a complete breakdown when he realizes his wife and daughter have fled the country, leaving him now completely alone with the fate of Earth and the entire Human Race in his hands.

Ted, shattered by the loss of his wife and daughter, finds diving into his work the best medicine. He is assigned a new beautiful, intelligent and immensely capable executive assistant and coordinator, a stunning redhead named Ellen Hanson.

Ted pushes at the point of wanting to know who, and WHAT, Max was meeting with before the probe in his brain exploded. Were they part of "The Committee" with access to their projects? When the cypher-like "Higher up" Gen. Anderson tells Ted the answers to all his questions are "outside his purview," Ted, in a rage, ups and quits.

Two months go by. Dr. Harvey Gilpsen, PhD, or just Harv, bulls his way into Ted's home. He keeps all the ducks in a row and all the egos in check, and makes people forget he is also a fantastically brilliant scientist and one of the three most powerful men on Earth.

Harv tells Ted they need him back at work right away and assures him that Irina and Pasha are safe and Irina is working on the Russian versions of the functioning time devices. As a show of good faith, Harv goes into a dialogue about everything they know up to now and what they are doing about it.

They are trying to plug the holes in the Time/Space continuum and clean up the mess made by the US and Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. But the Aliens are, in fact, already here, and the US is trying to keep them under control at an underground base in northern New Mexico called The Dulce Archeleta Mesa. The "Big Blonde Bastard" Nordics run the robotic little Greys. Then we are dealing with "these reptilian motherfuckers, the Alpha Draconians...the scum of the universe!" The Nordics and Greys are engaged in an ongoing genetic breeding program to basically turn Aliens into humans and that it is all about capturing the human soul.

"What are you offering me?" Ted asks suspiciously.

"The whole enchilada, Nephew. All the parts of the game laid out, tied down, spread eagle, butt ass naked. You take over the Ops at Five-One, figure out how to use the portal, mix it with the gizmos on the Cosmic Corvette, bada-bing, bada-bang, bada-boom! Get results! Beg, borrow, steal, kill, I don't care! Just get results! I...Don't...CARE! Make it all real in less than ten years and I will hand you the keys to the kingdom."

Ted takes the job and returns to Five-One and works again with the beautiful Ellen Hansen. Ted loses no time in making her Assistant Director of *PROJECT: TEMPUS FUGIT*.

In studying the "Sport Model" UFO and its ability to fold time, Ted figures out they could develop a man portable "Time Runner" device in less than five years. Harv continues with the revelations as to the who, what, when, where and why they are all doing what they are doing, and all the reasons for the panic in so many higher up inner circles:

"Because a Nazi rat bastard son of a bitch named Simon Ratterman escaped our custody in Germany in 1949, in a time machine of his own devising. He has been back here four times over the last 20 years. Each time he has brought back incontrovertible evidence of a story. That at some point after certain celestial alignments occur in December 2012, our planet will be invaded by extraterrestrials, hell bent to wipe every human being off the

face of the Earth. We have joined forces with the Nordics and the Alpha Draconians without telling them about the deals we have cut with each of them. We would make a deal with the devil if it would help us.

"Your job is to build a unit that gets us to 2012 and beyond to make sure what he is telling us is true."

Ted then relates his own double contacts with Ratterman and Irina's contact with him as well. Also that he must go to the Dulce Archeleta Mesa to verify a few of his theories.

Harv concludes by saying the man he works for, more than anything else in the universe, wants the ability to travel through time, and will stop at nothing to get it.

Ted and Ellen arrange to visit the Dulce underground base. Ellen is nervous and frightened, as she used to work there for twitchy, abusive and anal Dr. Calvin White who runs the facility.

At Dulce they're introduced to Lord Tugy, a tall, blonde, regal alien Nordic that acts as the liaison for "The Hive" below them that use levels 4 to 7 for their experiments. He is arrogant and haughty, with well over a 1,000-point IQ and views humans as nothing more than monkeys and is extremely dangerous.

The conversation is difficult and adversarial. Tugy all but refuses to answer any questions posed by these "inferior beings." But Ted backs Tugy up against the wall, grilling him like a Chicago street punk, by rattling off facts about Tugy's technology, his history, heritage, how he got to Earth, the nature of the "Royal Houses of Edacta" and why they need humans to bring in fresh genetics because his race was scraping the bottom of the shallow end of the gene pool with a bucket.

Tugy is utterly stunned! *"No one on Earth could possibly know these things!"* Tugy says, his infamous cool badly shaken! Ted, to everyone's shock and dismay, gets more and more belligerent with the Alien until he finally starts to get some answers. The exchange not only upsets Tugy, but

all the telepathic creatures in the Hive below listening in who are watching Tugy lose the argument and, more importantly, his control.

Lord Tugy is most disturbed that he cannot exert any mind-control over Ted. But Ted learns he can HEAR the telepathic buzz of the Hive below them, getting angrier and angrier as he pushes Tugy further over the edge. Ted abruptly ends the interview having achieved his goal of rattling "His Worshipfulness" and decides that talking to Tugy is a "waste of air!"

After the confrontation where Ted shows he knows more than he lets on or than he's supposed to know, they get a call from Harv. They are rerouted and flown to the Cayman Islands where Ted meets the Inner Core of "The Group." Specifically, Sir Charles Montgomery, the Supreme Coordinator of all activities concerning aliens on this planet by agreement with the Heads of State of the six major nations, and who also happens to be.... Ellen Hanson's father.

In the Cayman Islands, The Group's HQ run by Sir Charles is a sprawling, palatial tropical estate, run with military efficiency and precision. Harv joins them. It is also a cover for a vast underground facility that acts as one of six stations responsible for the defense of Earth.

Sir Charles is Old School proper British and all that entails. At a formal white jacket, black tie dinner, a nightly affair for Sir Charles, Ted expresses his disgust that all this Dr. No, Goldfinger, Ernst Starvro Blofeld stuff is crap, and a total waste of time and resources that should be spent on the tech they need to deal with the threat.

Ted barely escapes the dinner with his life but back in his bungalow smoking in the shadows sits a mysterious horribly scarred man. He introduces himself as Dr. George Bellamy, code name "BOSS 1," the true head of The Group and all the projects and programs it controls. He has three counterparts in Asia, Europe and South America. *"They do the same thing I do. Co-ordination of interplanetary defenses and preparation for what we call 'The Event Horizon' of the Alien Invasion."*

Bellamy is impressed with everything Ted has done so far. Ted explains he knows much of what he does due to Dr. Simon Ratterman, and what appears to be an advanced telepathy due to his interaction with the Montauk temporal time fields.

The next day Ted meets George Bellamy for breakfast:

"I need to know," Bellamy says, laying all the cards down on the table, "if we can defeat the Grays in the Hive at Dulce first. Second, how much of their tech can we back engineer to hammer them back into oblivion. Third; can we close the ton rips in space/time and formulate a plan to defend ourselves when the Reptilians decide to drop into our space and cleanse this world of us?"

"Okay. Where do I fit in?" Ted asks.

"Make it happen. All of it!" Bellamy says.

Sir Charles joins them for breakfast, made much worse by Ted ham-handedly telling him he plans on marrying Ellen.

Bellamy takes Ted on a tour of the massive underground facility, the main feature is a huge HQ called "STUDIO CONTROL," one of six all over the world, that monitors near and deep space for "Incursions and hostile activity."

Suddenly, Ted gets a stabbing pain in his head, and Studio Control picks up a huge meteor hurtling directly towards the mid-Atlantic! This is the Gray retaliation for Ted's drubbing of Lord Tugy at Dulce.

Ted gets a crash course on how everything works and is quickly promoted to BOSS 3. We also see how all of the military mechanisms fit together and come under the direct control of Boss 1 to deal with a planetary threat.

A panicked call comes in from Dr. Calvin White at Dulce.

"They tried to overpower the guards and get to the second floor! The MPs wouldn't let them and someone shot somebody and all hell has broken loose!"

Ted goes quiet in the chaos as he telepathically tunes in, letting the cacophony into his conscious mind, surrendering to it, dropping all resistance, breathing it in. It is like a nest of hornets in his skull.

"Hook me into the com system at Dulce so the whole base can hear me!" Ted yells. "You think to demonstrate your superiority by harming us. I have given Dr. Calvin White orders to overload the nuclear reactor and destroy the mountain. Your Race and your Royal houses will die out. I will end you! Right NOW!"

Lord Tugy attempts to speak with Ted, and Ted shuts him out, refusing his call, as Ted prays Tugy doesn't call his bluff.

The bluff works. The asteroid veers off. Earth is saved!

After his heroics, Ted is now established as *Boss #3*, the man third in charge of just about everything on Earth. Ted and Sir Charles make peace and Charles gives Ted his dead mother's diamond ring as a wedding ring for Ellen.

Ted and Ellen are married and the real work begins.

Now that he is Boss 3, Ted is given a new assistant/body-guard, Major Jack Thomson. Thomson must be with him everywhere, day and night. Jack also went to USC, so they become fast friends.

They visit Dulce for another encounter with Lord Tugy. The base from Level 3 down looks like a burned out war zone. Ted demands Tugy give them back their wounded, but even the survivors are so blasted by radiation there is no hope for them. This lead to MORE questions about what is really going on below Level Four?

Meanwhile, Ellen shopping in Taos, NM, is kidnapped by none other than Ann Corbett! She is recovered several days later, wandering in Sante Fe. Ellen seems physically fine but confused, at first. But she slowly descends into idleness, burning rage, and alcoholism, as horrible suppressed memories of her abduction seethe like magma just beneath the surface.

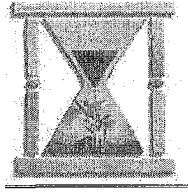
From New Mexico, Bellamy and Ted jump the "Underworld Railroad", a top-secret system of deep underground trains that crisscross the country, traveling at upwards of 800 MPH. They come up at Area 51.

Ellen sets up house at their new home in Las Vegas, and no one better be late for dinner, but her psychological condition is a ticking time bomb.

Ted feels they have a fighting chance against the invading Vistors, if only we have...*THE TIME!*

Part one

The Sport Model



Chapter 1

Things started moving again at the Groom Lake laboratory. Between Ellen's dedication and Jack's perceptive abilities and instincts, we started building the testing schedule on the Sport Model and were well into re-designing the device to meet the new demands and requirements. I was pleased to say the least.

Several months had gone by and everything inside the facility was working quite well. That was about all I could claim as a success. There had been no further incidents with the aliens at Dulce and I had postponed my meeting with Tugy indefinitely until I felt more ready to approach him head on, one more time.

Ridgeway finished up screening over two hundred people and had come up with thirty-nine implanted devices. Just when he thought he was finished with the list I had drawn up for him, I told him I wanted to start all over again and screen everyone one more time. It might have been frustrating to him, but I wanted to make sure no one had been re-acquired by our little gray friends.

Harv had come up to Nevada to make sure everything was moving along and for once he was pleased with everything. Bellamy was silent on his island and I soon learned that unless there was something that needed his direct attention, he was not going to get involved. He'd bestowed his trust on me, and that allowed me to exercise my discretion to get the tasks done.

The bi-weekly meeting with the division heads had finished up and I asked Harv, Ellen, Dr. Ridgeway and Jack to stay behind for a few minutes. Shirley stepped into the conference room and gave me the thumbs up signal, which meant that everyone was out of the area and we had it to ourselves, then stepped out and closed the door.

"I thought you were going to re-assign her somewhere else, like Fargo or Bismarck, North Dakota?" Ellen asked with a smile.

"Why?" I looked at her questioningly. "She is like a right hand around here for all of us."

"Yeah, well she calls me 'the new ball and chain' when I'm not in earshot." Ellen laughed at her own joke.

"The girl sounds perspicacious to me! Hell, I ought to make her an assistant director somewhere." Harv croaked.

"Not on your life." Jack added with animation. "She can spell."

"What?" The three of us sitting across from him spoke at once.

"She can spell! Let me tell you, I am a professional solider, but my grammar is lousy. If it wasn't for her editing my writing, you would all be wondering what it was you were reading and if some of Tugy's people wrote it." The self-effacement was revealing and needed considering the amount of time we had spent lately getting everything back on track.

"Listen, jokes aside," Harv got down to brass tacks, "we got several problems I need to bring you folks up to speed on and the Boss is all over me, Because he thinks you need to factor them into what we're doing here."

Harv pulled his battered black notebook out of his pocket. "The first thing is the new guy we got over in that rented house on Pennsylvania Avenue. You know that big white monstrosity someone decided to build for John Addams? Well, anyway, this new guy is one of those bible thumper, goody two-shoes types, who thinks everything in government should be open and above board and he's pushing this new Freedom of Information Act through both houses and he's probably going to get it. It'll take a year or so but then some of these fantasy writers of pseudo- science fiction books about UFOs are going to be all over it to get everything out of us that they can to find out what we know.

"The other thing just sticking in my throat is the fact that he is demanding a financial review of The Group. Where we get our money, what we do with it and how many people work for us." Harv saw our faces and realized that each and every one of us couldn't believe what he was saying. "Don't look at me like I'm the stupid one here. I didn't vote for the guy! And besides, you don't want to kill the messenger!

"Listen, this peanut farmer lives, breathes and eats purity and thinks we can 'all just get along.' After the first two briefing sessions over at the White House, he smiled and said thank you in that sickening honeysuckle sweet southern style and then sicked his dogs on us to find out exactly what's going on. He finds he needs to be fiscally responsible to the American people and thinks we may be featherbedding this issue to give ourselves jobs."

Harv closed his book and looked up.

"Why don't we take him for a field trip down to level five at Dulce." Jack spoke before anyone else. Ellen winced with the thought of that excursion.

"Re-direct him." I spoke without thinking too much about it. "Get Bellamy to call in some favors and have someone place him on the top of

their list for some kind of peace accord or have him as chief negotiator for some war someplace. If we don't have one, start one, Harv. Buy his aides out from under him. Bribe them, compromise them or kill them, I don't really care. But get the message across that any interference with this mission will get a one way ticket to nowhere." I rubbed my face and felt the stubble on my chin.

"You're a rather ruthless character, aren't you?" Ellen spoke to the side of my face.

"I have to be." I motioned to Harv to continue, his eyes lit up at the idea.

"I like that. Bellamy will, too. Good! Now the other thing bothering some of us, and it's not so much about the R and D stuff you guys are doing, but what our comrade counter parts are doing in the Russian Motherland." Harv checked his notebook again.

"Dr. Ridgeway, I need for you to get someone inside the Soviet Union. I need to create a situation where they start to worry about implants. They need to know some of their best folks are tagged, infected and need to be treated." I waited while this man of impeccable personal morals thought about what I had just said.

"If I go to Switzerland and meet with two or three doctors I know there and show them what I have found, they may certainly use that information to enhance their standing with some folks who come to them for treatments. They are not the ones involved in the lab work, but they are the guys that run the show in Red Square. It might work." Ridgeway made some notes to himself.

"Jack, make it happen for the good doctor." I spoke without looking at the man I knew would already be making his own list.

"Consider it done. Military or public transport?" Jack waited.

"Big Bird. Put a sweep team with him." Harv offered up something that he would normally never let anyone else use, his own private jet aircraft. Or rather a painted U.S. aircraft that he thought of as his own private business jet. "The guys in the Politburo will be putting everyone through a screening once they know about this. Hell, pig farms in the Urals will be screened." He laughed.

"And Irina?" Ellen said quietly.

"Yup, I hope so. 'Cause if they're not, they'll get ahead of us on their little device, 'cause we all know someone has made one work already, don't we?" I got up from the table. "Anything else we should know about, uncle?" Harv laughed again and motioned for me to sit down.

"Yes, I kept this one to last. Doc?" He turned to Ridgeway and without saying anything he got up and smiled.

"May I use a phone to call my staff officer back at the clinic and tell them I'll be gone for several clays?" He lightly touched Harv's shoulder.

"Shirley will find you one, Doctor, and thank you for coming out." I added.

"I am always glad to be of service." He left without another word. "That is one fine man." Harv said with true honesty. "He's worked around the clock to find every one of those little freaky bugs in people, do you know that?"

Without preamble, I stood up. "I want a second facility set up and another set of screening protocols established. I want everyone that went through the first series to be tested again." I sat back down.

Harv looked at me in utter disbelief. "Do you trust anybody?"

"No. Trust no one." I looked at their hurt faces. "I would trust my life to two of the three other people in this room, Harv." I watched him flinch at the statement.

"You're a hard man." Harv rejoined his normal jovial self a moment later. "You're also better for it. You think Ridgeway's been compromised?"

"Isn't he the logical choice? Look at the list of those carrying the bug in their heads. All low level in our pecking order: scientists, technicians, security. Why not A.D.s or A.D.D.s?" I looked over at Jack and nodded for him to start talking.

"Dr. Gilspen," Jack went formal and Harv sat back looking at him with a fixed stare, "three weeks ago I went through screening at Ridgeway's facility. He cleared me. Two days later, Ted had me re-examined here by a new team I put together for an inside screening, without anyone knowing." Jack pulled a small clear plastic square box out of his pocket and pushed it across the table. Harv picked it up and studied it for several minutes. He placed it back down quietly on the table and opened his notebook again. Flipping through it, he finally stopped.

"Number Six, A.D. Rodriguez and Clements from London. All screened and certified by Ridgeway. All three still had a bug. Bellamy had each one re-screened after they saw him. The Boss was sure that all three of you had been re-infected and I was supposed to get you back east without you knowing why and have additional screening done." Harv closed his book.

"There are now three people in this room, I would trust with my life," I answered.

"I understand, kiddo. This is a dangerous business and none of us can drop our guard." Harv looked over at Ellen, who'd been stoic through the whole process. "How's being married to this guy working out for you?"

"Ted's a slave driver here and collapses at home. Jack plays a mean hand of cribbage and I still get lost in that house of ours. Outside of that, what else could a girl ask for in life?" She smiled sadly.

"I will take the good doctor with me on the big bird and then arrange for a sweep team to go with him. Do you want me to bring him back or not?" Harv pulled on his old tweed jacket.

"Your call, Harv, not mine." I got up and walked out with him to the lobby area. "But after he is done in Europe, I would have him checked and then send him someplace where he can perform real medicine for us." I hoped Harv was in a benevolent mood when decision time rolled around.

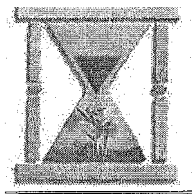
"Sounds to me like there's trouble on the home front?" Harv took me by the arm.

"She's just tired and still trying to figure out what happened in Santa Fe. The shrink says she's suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, P.T.S.D. for short. Says you see it in people injured in war, shot on the street by a mugger or raped. She's spending a lot of time crying to herself. She doesn't know I know. We still sleep in the same bed, and that's about it; sleeping. She has a hard time being close right now. So, I come to work and try not to think about it too much."

Ridgeway was waiting in the front lobby area, joking with Shirley about something or other.

"Alright then," Harv said boisteriously, "I will call you when I have something else on that little matter. Thanks for the time, Ted." He left with Ridgeway.

I watched as they walked down the corridor together.



Chapter 2

I had most of the facility shut down for the weekend and gave everyone except the security staff, two research scientists, Jack and myself, a three-day weekend. Surprisingly, a lot of the folks grumbled about it, wanting to continue what they were doing on the "Device" side of the house.

On Friday night, I had the staff and Jack meet me in the hanger bay. The order of the day was for soft clothes and tennis shoes.

"Here is the deal. The last two times I crawled into this thing I have lost several hours. The first time I lost about twenty hours and the next time just about ten. So that's what's happening. I have been working on the problem and may have some answers for us, but we need to try it under controlled conditions, with witnesses this time. Hal, you and Ed are going to stay in the hanger bay at all times. If one of us needs to take a leak or do something else the other one stays in and keeps notes on what is happening to the craft. Understood?" I waited for the two men to think through the process and nod.

"What are we looking for boss?" Hal, a young and very bright engineer had been with us for a couple of years right out of college and had been doing good work in the miniaturization of the device.

"Anything, everything, whatever. Any kind of movement, behavior or anomaly. I don't know if this thing changes color or makes a sound or squeaks when you squeeze it. So, you two okay with that?" I waited.

"Yes, sir." Harris answered. He'd come over from the old Montauk project, and he had good standing as a physicist, but for the life of me I couldn't remember him from my days with Bates.

"You two, I want outside the door. Same deal, one of you is always there. In the last set of experiments I found that the guys sitting on the other side of the door weren't affected. But if this thing puts out a gravity wave of some kind, and Harris and Hal here are caught in it, they won't be able to leave. You guys are the secondary recorders. Keep your logs on the basis of how many times they come out or if they do come out at all. But, and I repeat, but; don't come in here unless you believe we are in

danger. I can't explain that any better. You are going to have to make a judgment call. I believe both of you are good enough to do that for me." I nodded at the two hard looking men in uniforms and they responded with their normal impassive response of nodding once.

"What about me, Ted?" Jack stood with a clipboard in his hand.

"You my friend are taking a ride with me. You know a heck of a lot more than I do about flying and I want to see if we can find out how this thing operates," I winked at him.

Jack looked stunned. "I have no idea how to fly this bucket and you know it!"

"Yup. But you know about ground reference and night flying. Right now that's what we need on board." I motioned to the two security officers. They went over to the main hanger doors and opened them up.

"If we get this thing up, are you really planning to take it outside?" Jack was stuttering.

"I have a cordon of other security personnel around the perimeter of the field in jeeps and vehicles to keep anyone away. We'll be all right out on the tarmac or just above it. But the first part is to see if we can get this to work in zero time." I walked over and popped the lid on the craft.

"Zero time? I haven't heard that before." Jack walked over and looked inside, like it was filled with poisonous snakes.

"That is because no one has figured out that this ship can move forward, backwards and sideways in time. Sideways makes it a zero time ship. You move through distances without moving through time." I crawled up into the back seat and waited for Jack to mount the flight control seat.

"You know, you aren't paying me to be a test pilot. Those guys are over at Edward's in California and they do this for a living." Jack climbed in, almost doubling over his six foot three frame, then he squatted in the chair looking ridiculous, like a circus clown riding a tricycle. He gave me a funny exasperated look and was just about to get up out of frustration when the seat morphed and adjusted perfectly around his body. "Oh, yeah!" He exclaimed with delighted surprise. "Can I get these in my Corvette?"

I gave the thumbs-up to the two men standing alertly in the hanger bay and they took their places at the table and chairs I had brought in from the cafeteria.

"Nice isn't it?" I said over to Jack. "Just like a recliner."

"Or a coffin." Jack mused darkly as he ran his hands all over the surfaces to feel the materials.

"The last guy in here with me died." With one more thumbs-up to the crew I hit the control to lower the hatch and watched as it lowered then went transparent.

"Thanks I needed that." Jack lifted his hands up and held them in clear view. "What do I do?"

"Place this over the middle console and wait." I handed him the plastic template I'd kept with me for almost two years. We could both watch the guys sitting at the main table. They had stopwatches running and were making notes. The largest hanger bay doors in the world rolled open and the two security officers took their places by each one. The night outside was high desert crystal clear and the sky was alive with a brilliant, pulsing blanket of stars.

"Console is up. Template engaged." Jack sounded like he was in a normal cockpit.

"Hit the middle button, top row. Depress it and hold it for three seconds." I hoped I was right.

"Middle button, top row. Engaged. Holding, 1, 2, 3 and released." Jack and I waited and visually we could see the craft lift off the ground and rise relative to the hanger surrounding us, but there was absolutely no sensation of lifting or movement.

"Check the desk. Are they still watching? Are they moving?" I asked Jack.

"Yes."

"Left side of the console there should be a protruding knob." I sat back and closed my eyes for a moment thinking it through.

"Got it. Left side." Jack took a deep breath and braced himself sinking deeper into the seat with a leathery crunch.

"Okay...slight pressure forward. Think about it like a joystick, but at a skewed angle. Forward, reverse, left and right. Left will be down and right..."

"Up!" Jack said, excited. I opened my eyes and watched as we jumped towards the ceiling, almost crashing into it, then leveled off into a hover.

"Whoa, Nelly! Easy, Hoss! This thing is designed for open spaces, so don't do anything too radical." I made a couple of notes on the clipboard in my lap.

"Velvet." Jack said.

"What?"

"It's smooth, like velvet, baby! If it works like this it would be really easy to fly, I think." Jack held his hands up so I could see them from behind.

"If you feel comfortable, take it out Major Thompson!" I smiled to myself.

"You are kidding me, right?" Jack half turned in his seat to look back at me.

"I wouldn't want to try it out in space just yet, but what the hell, take it around the block and see what it feels like." I saw him reach down and lay his hands on the control like he was making love to a woman.

"What about base control over at Five One? We'll be on their radar as soon as we're out of the hanger."

"I told control we'd be working a project tonight without radio, so anything that comes up out of here tonight has priority. They have cleared the skies for us." I wanted to see the truth in action and here was my chance.

"Well, what the hell. I'm gonna fly me a goddamn UFO!" Jack pushed the knob slightly and headed out of the hanger. As we passed the men at the desk they were standing and watching. Hal had a camera recording the flight.

Once outside, Jack let it hover for a moment and then accelerated into a slight climb. In seconds we were looking down at the lights of the base and in the distance the lights of Las Vegas. He made a slow roll to the left over the mountains and then back around over the bombing range south of our facility. Then he gently brought it down to the deck and pushed up the speed. Moving in tight circles, he moved it right back to the front of the hanger bay, took it inside and sat it down in the same spot we started from.

He was like a student pilot who had just soloed for the first time. Jack was laughing his ass off and whooping like an Apache when we opened the hatch. I was a little more reserved and concerned since now there were three men standing in the hanger bay awaiting our return.

* * * * *

As the hatch locked into the open position, Jack slid out and I followed. I looked up into the scarred face of George Bellamy standing next to the technicians. I didn't have time for this right now, but my first concern was getting the marked time to know how we did. I walked to the table.

"Hal, how long have we been gone?"

"What?" Hal answered.

"What! What do you mean 'WHAT'?" I exploded at him. "How much time's elapsed while we were airborne? That's what you were supposed to be doing here!"

"Boss?" He looked from me to Bellamy and back, utterly baffled. "You haven't gone anyplace! You've been inside that thing, maybe, two minutes. You closed the hatch, this man walked in, then you opened it back up."

I looked at Bellamy, wearing a very special visitors badge, indicating to the technicians that he was not to be asked any questions at all. He motioned for me to walk with him and Jack followed.

"What happened?"

I looked at my watch and held it up to his. He looked down and smiled.

"Twenty one minutes difference. I am living that much ahead of the two of you in time." Bellamy walked over to the desk and looked at the electronic timer on the table and compared it to his own watch. "On the money. Same thing."

"Gentlemen, thank you. You may take off for the weekend." I regained my composure as both men, who were now in a state of mystification, walked out of the hanger with their notepads under their arms, whispering to each other.

"I wanted to get here for the trial," Bellamy said softly, "but I got lost driving over here from Five-One. Had to have security escort me to the main building entrance and by then you guys were inside the craft."

"Jack," I said, having a thought, "check the security guards in the hallway." He trotting over to the door then came back.

"Same thing. It was not an isolated event within the radius of the craft." Jack was beaming.

"I ask again, what happened?" Bellamy pulled out his pipe and lit it.

"We took the craft outside, flew it over the base, down to Warm Springs and back up across the bombing range at what seemed like Mach 2." Jack told him.

"So... it flies?" Bellamy almost dropped his pipe. "You got it up?"

"Not only that, but we did it in a reversal of time." I was making notes on my clipboard. "What seems like twenty minutes to us was really running backwards here. The last two times I tried this thing out, I lost time. But this time we were able to take it out, make the test run and come back and only two minutes passed in this local area. The time wave was kept inside the ship and in that way we could move through time, without a distortion field happening in a forward motion. But we still didn't get to zero-time movement." I looked at Jack.

"That means there is one more setting in there we may have missed." Jack walked back toward the ship and pulled out the template.

"The clock was running for you inside the craft but was not running here, did I get that right?" Bellamy asked.

"Correct, but that was not the experiment I wanted to conduct. needed to see if we could do it and not have any time movement at all." wondered what I had missed.

"Maybe you did. Hold on." Bellamy walked over to the red wall telephone and called someone and spoke very animatedly for several minutes. He hung up and laughed as he came back over to us.

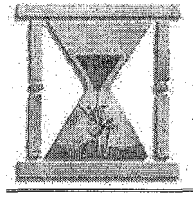
"What's going on, Boss?" Jack asked.

"Well, you were right and wrong about the experiment. Twenty-one minutes passed for you in the craft, two minutes passed here on the deck. But I just spoke to the main tower up on Bald Mountain and they have a recorded radar tape showing you were airborne for. .." he paused for dramatic effect, "one hour and forty-two minutes." Jack and I both shared slack jawed glances. "They are screaming bloody murder, wanting to know what we're testing over here, because of the moves and 90 degree angles you were flying at." Bellamy thought for a minute. "We need to get someone over there and get that tape. The controller told me you hit a surface altitude of fifty-two thousand feet in less than two minutes and you almost went off the track twice, once south and the other time east. That is close to three hundred air miles."

"But Boss," Jack said, now pretty confused, "we turned around at about five thousand feet over Las Vegas." Jack looked hard at him, now thinking his leg was being pulled.

"Try Barstow on for size, at forty-one thousand feet, right through the transcontinental flight path. Two reports of a UFO were filed by two separate jetliners." Bellamy started to walk back into the complex.

"Get out the slide rules boys." He waited at the doorway for us to catch up. "You got some more work to do."



Chapter 3

Ellen was still up when Jack, Bellamy and I walked into the living room of our home. She looked up from where she was sitting on the couch, reading a magazine.

"GB, what are you doing here?" She neither looked surprised, happy or shocked. She was running most of the time in neutral these days and it was no different tonight.

"I decided I'd avail myself of your husband's offer of dinner and a bed for the night. I hope that's alright?" Bellamy walked over and took her hand in his and stared deeply into her eyes for what seemed like an extended, uncomfortable moment.

"Of course it is." She said, her voice still dead even. "Glad you came. I told Maria to hold off until Ted got home for dinner, so I will get her working on it." Ellen got up and walked to the kitchen. "Why don't you make our friends a drink, Ted."

She left the room as Jack and GB exchanged worried knowing glances. They had been at this stuff much longer than I.

"The words are right but the body language is way out of context." GB said offhandedly. Jack nodded, looking worried.

"She's been a little distant of late," I said, not wanting to make too much of it. Both men looked at me. "Probably just stress. She's been through a lot recently. Drinks, gentlemen?" I went over to the bar trying to change the subject and poured everyone a stiff one. By the time Ellen came back everyone had taken a chair and was holding their glasses.

"Would you like one, Ellen?" I asked her.

"No." She sat back down on the couch and picked up her magazine. "How did the test go tonight?" She said to Jack.

"We flew it. It does some incredible stuff. But the time factor has all of us confused." Jack sipped his drink.

"We?" She asked looking at me.

"Jack and I." I answered her scrutinizing look.

"That is just plain stupid!" She spit out at me, like venom from a cobra. "You have no idea what you are dealing with! You both could

have ended up on the other side of the galaxy, or lost, not knowing what to do! Jesus Christ, George! How could you allow them to do that?" She turned on Bellamy with the same rage she exhibited towards me.

"It is what we do," I countered, trying to get her attention back on me.

"NO, IT ISN'T!" She stood up, screaming at us. "You manipulate people's lives! You twist the truth and call it protection! You're more than willing to kill anyone who would come between you and the power you so desperately crave!" She flew completely off the handle. "I was THERE when you told Harvey he could kill Dr. Ridgeway! KILL. .. Doctor Ridgeway, if he thought it was necessary! And you did it like you were ordering a goddamn pizza to go! Not like you were ordering the MURDER of a PERSON! My God, Ridgeway was one of the most harmless men I've ever met!! And you ...THUGS... just had him, what do they say in the mafia ... RUBBED OUT!"

"That's not a totally accurate statement, Ellen, but don't let me interfere in a family fight." Bellamy drank his drink and got up. "I think I'll pass on dinner and get a room in Vegas. Thanks anyway." He started for the door.

"What exactly is THAT supposed to mean, Boss One?" She screamed at his back. He slowly, ominously, turned to face her.

"In your present state of mind, I do not know that I want to answer that question, because you probably wouldn't listen to reason." He thought for a moment. "But since you asked, and you are obviously concerned, and out of respect for you, Ellen, I will tell you. Dr. Ridgeway has disappeared. He has not gone missing. He has simply vanished, literally into thin air, and not I, nor anyone else, have the slightest idea of where he is or what's happened to him. Harvey relocated him to Atlanta. We bought him a mansion, gave him an unlimited Treasury Direct Black debit card, put a few million in his bank account and even set up college funds for all his grandchildren. He gave us a list of everything he wanted and we set up a state of little art laboratory according to his exact specifications. He was overjoyed on his first day at work and was happily working in his new lab...for a grand total of six minutes. He was there and then he was simply...gone. That was four days ago. That is why I am here now, to find out if anyone else is experiencing any major changes."

"They took him!" Ellen brought her hand up to her mouth in horror.

"Who took him, Ellen?" I asked and she looked at me with terror in her eyes.

"They did! The ones that. .." she stopped talking.

"How do you know?" Bellamy spoke very quietly to her.

"I know. He'll be going through ... the same thing...that I..." Suddenly, she collapsed in the middle of the room, like a puppet with the strings cut. I was beside her as quickly as Jack, checking her pulse as and

held her face in his hands. She began to convulse with her eyes wide open. Bellamy whipped off his leather belt, folded it over and jammed it in her mouth to keep her from biting off her tongue.

"Call the base hospital!" Bellamy barked at Jack as he helped me pick her up and put her on the couch. "Smash Team on a chopper, her in it in, fifteen or less, on my authority, understood?"

"Sir!" Jack grabbed the phone and dialed.

"Have an isolation ward established and call Harv. Get his fat ass out here now. Forget Big Bird, use an Interceptor. I want him here at Mach 5!" Bellamy looked up at me. "I need your permission to use one of the compounds that will open up her mind and allow us to find out what happened to her in Santa Fe."

"Tell me it won't hurt her," I pleaded and Bellamy just shook his head.

"I can't do that. I can tell you if we don't go in and pull that shit out of her skull and replace it with something different, she'll self-destruct in a matter of weeks, maybe days. They did something to her and she needs help, right now." Bellamy stood up and looked at Jack.

"Airborne, en route." Jack went into the kitchen to speak to Maria.

"You've seen this before?" I asked Bellamy.

He nodded his head and rubbed his jaw. "Yeah. Unfortunately. If what happened to her is what I think occurred she's carrying enough trauma in there to kill a dozen people." Bellamy paused a few moments until Jack came back. "Have the flight crew on the chopper isolated for at least seventy-two hours and seal the base once we have her inside."

"Got it, boss." Jack left for a moment, then came back dressed in his uniform, including his sidearm.

"Harvey is the best there is at doing a mind probe using the bug juice. I'll have two shrinks standing by. She'll have the very best on this planet. But Ted," Bellamy took me by the shoulders and looked me in the face, pulling me close, looking ugly and monstrous now. "I don't want you in the room. You can't hear this until we're through."

"I can't do that, George!" I protested, feeling a tide of anger rising from a well of helplessness. "She's my wife!"

"She's an integral part of our team." Bellamy said. "I could order it, but I won't. I am asking you...as a friend. Don't put yourself through this. Hearing what she's been through will...change you. It's like rape, times a hundred. You'll never be able to look at her the same way again. It could destroy whatever you have together and I don't want to see that happen." He thought for a long moment. "If you really want, I'll let you listen to the tape when we're clone." Bellamy pulled a small vial from his pocket and took two pills, swallowing them with his glass of booze.

"Alright," I conceded, "but don't edit them."

"I wouldn't think of it. It's just when she's going through the release, it won't be pretty and you'd want us to stop and we can't. I don't want her to associate you with anything we have to do." Bellamy turned his head at the sound of running feet.

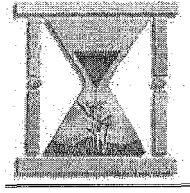
"Smash Team, Boss!" Jack opened the door and pointed to Ellen who was now unconscious on the couch, still foaming at the mouth.

"Treat her easy boys, that's an order." Bellamy looked at the lead paramedic who turned and looked at Thompson in uniform and sidearm and realized this civilian was in charge.

"Yes, sir." He pulled the gurney up next to her and three of them lifted her gently, as if they were picking up a dozen eggs.

"Ted," Bellamy said, barking orders again, "come with me. Jack, seal this place; post guards. Follow us to the base then have it sealed from the entrance inwards."

Bellamy tenderly held Ellen's hand as if he were the only lifeline was keeping her from hurtling into an abyss as we walked out to the waiting chopper in the middle street in the quiet neighborhood. The night then filled with the whirling sounds of accelerating rotors lifting off.



Chapter 4

Sitting in my office, I tried to make like I was working. It was 0300, the soul's midnight. My ashtray overflowed and I couldn't drink another cup of Joe. I felt like that guy on the fourteen-day coffee and cigarette weight loss program. Being wired was not my favorite feeling, and tonight was no exception. I looked around the room at the pictures I'd hung years before, mostly of experimental aircraft. It was designed to camouflage the real intent of the work I did here and make it look like a normal office in some section of the R & D part of government. But there was nothing normal about my world. For years I'd abjured normal research wandering far outside the classic cathedral walls of establishment science for this iconoclastic, God forsaken rabbit hole I'd tumbled down. I realized in so many ways, in this dark night of the soul, that Bates had been right on that night he tried to warn me all those years ago: this work ruins lives.

I thought about my own father, Bates' ultimate doom, Sally Jennings, Matt Reilly, Max, Admiral Jacobs, Sir Charles, Irina, my beloved little Pasha and now my darling Ellen, and so many more that I couldn't even remember. All of them victims. All of them offered up as sacrifices on the same altar to some angry god that commanded we were the one and only true church, that only we were righteous and that we had the right to destroy any life to gain our ends. But this night, the faces returned with a haunting vengeance, wrapped in a shroud of betrayal of all that I believed and once held sacred.

I tried to push the thoughts away, but they stormed in like a great horde having their way with me. I was one of the architects of this madness and I didn't know how to turn the machine off that I started so many years ago. I wondered where would it all end?

"Where it should." A voice came from the hallway. I jerked open my desk drawer and pulled out the small automatic, pointing it towards the sound.

"Who's there?" I yelled, jumping up and pushing my chair back hard against the bookshelf behind me.

"Just some old harmless friend, thas' all." The black janitor I'd seen all those years before at Cal Tech, walked into my office. The one who'd given me the equation that set me on the path I was on. In so many ways, he was the real architect of either my destiny or my destruction. He was still dressed exactly the same, in his dark uniform and red rag sticking out of his back pocket.

"May I sit down, Dr. Humphrey?"

I lowered my arms and the gun clattered to the floor as I, literally, no longer had the strength to hold it. I could only gape at him like a trout gasping for air.

"I-I-know ...you!" I bumbled out at last. "That night ...in my office when you added the equations...to my calculations..."

"Thas right, boss. Been awhile now hasn't it. Sit down, son. Please sit down and pick up that cap gun and put it away. Won do you no good no how anyways. If I was here ta hurtcha, you'd be dead and gone by now." He smiled with a full set of white teeth against his beaming dark chocolate brown face. "Go ahead. Pull the trigger. See if I'm lying."

I was regaining my strength and courage now. I picked up the gun, pointed it directly at his head, point blank, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

"Now that was mighty unfriendly." Still smiling, he reached across the desk and took the gun from my hand, popped out the clip, and expertly ejected the round, plucking it out of the air. He placed all the items in the OUT basket on my desk.

"See? Wasn't lying to you. Never have, never will." He smiled again and laughed.

"Who are you?" I sat down slowly still not sure I wasn't dreaming all this.

"Me? Names don't mean much. Call me Charlie. Yeah, Charlie's as good a name as any. Got a nice ring to it." He offered me a stick of gum. "Better for you than those coffin nails."

I just continued to stare.

"Suit yourself." He put the package back in his pocket and smiled.

"So, what do you want?" My curiosity began to overcome my shock.

"Don't want nothin'. Just stopped by ta tell ya a couple a things. First, Miss Ellen's gonna be fine. Those two old boys over yonder, in the base hospital, they know their stuff, yes sir-ee. Oh the tape? It's gonna be pretty bad. But when she come 'round, she won' 'member none of it. It'll all be gone and then you gots your little darlin' back, safe and sound. But if I was you, and I ain't, but if I was, I'd keep Miss Ellen out of dis place for sure and for good." Charlie smiled and looked around. "Well I gotta be going. Got rounds to make."

"What are you?" I had to ask.

"Me?" Charlie smiled and looked up. "I'm a thought that's been amplified and moves through atoms with the ease and lightness of air. I am only a mere reflection of someone else's thoughts." He smiled again. "It's a poem I read once. Oh, mercy! I almost forgot. I was asked to give you somethin'." He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and laid it down on the desk in front of me. "You have three choices in all of life. You can accept, you can reject or you can abstain from making any decision. But the game is about choices, not about the results those choices lead to." Charlie got up and wiped his hands on the red rag and smiled at me again.

"Who sent you?" I stood up still suspicious.

"Listen to you! All fulla questions that don't make no nevermind. There are folks that care 'bout you, sunny boy, and they ain't gonna let you get hurt in all of this." He stopped and twisted his head. "Now I've gone and said enough for one day. Cots to be about my bidness." He walked out of the office humming, closing the door behind him.

I dove for the door, flinging it open then darted into the hallway. It was dark and empty. I ran up to the lobby and there was no one there. I considered calling security at the main entrance, but knew better. Charlie didn't work in this facility and probably wasn't here at all.

I sat down at my desk again, reloaded my gun and tossed it in the drawer. Then very carefully I unfolded the paper. The work was all carefully done by hand. It was a fine engineering drawing of the fully completed small device we had been working so hard to build. It had all the components labeled and shown in scale. It made perfect sense, once I looked at it three different times. Everything I'd missed had been placed on the drawing and it showed the interrelationship to each item. Someone very badly wanted me to have this device and knew the way I was going about it was all trial, error and plain dumb luck. Obviously someone, or something, couldn't wait that long. This single drawing took five years off our program in one night.

I refolded it and put it in my pocket. I slipped into my jacket and headed out for the lobby. I was going to drive over and see what Bellamy and Dr. Harvey Gilpsen had done to the inside of my wife's head. I realized this was the first time Jack hadn't been with me in a long time.

I'd been all alone in a deserted building, just like that night at Cal Tech, all those grains of sand ago.

* * * * *

Harv looked like he'd been dragged through a keyhole backwards or teleported somewhere inside out. His shirt was rumpled and his eyes were bloodshot, behind his glasses. Bellamy had changed into a surgical

top, leaving his jacket and dress shirt somewhere in the building. His arms, now exposed, showed scars all up and down. I realized he'd been through some tough times as well.

"This isn't pretty laddie buck," Harv sat back drinking what had to be his sixtieth cup of coffee for the day and lit a cigarette taking a drag like someone that'd been underwater for 3 minutes gulping air. "You sure you want to hear it?"

I turned to Bellamy. "Before you start I want a couple of questions answered."

"Shoot." He said flatly.

I tossed out my question to see what would happen and gage their reactions. "Do we have a dead alien body anyplace?"

"That's a damn strange question, considering what we're here for." Harv planted his hands on his knees and twisted his head, like I was an insect ready for dissection.

Bellamy turned, looking at me questioningly. "We do. Why?"

"Can I have it? To take apart?"

"If you feel it will aide your mission here, of course, but that still doesn't answer my question: why?" Bellamy never changed his tone.

"Take a look at this." I handed him the folded paper. He looked at it and then refolded it and handed it back to me.

"Let's cut around the comers shall we, Ted. What do you want to know?" Bellamy sat back.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" Harv got up and slammed his fist into the table. "You two want to just go outside and duke it out or something? What in the hell is going on here? We just took Ellen's brains apart in there. Isn't anyone going to even ask how she fucking IS??"

"Calm down, Harv." Bellamy looked up at him and pointed to the chair. "You are witnessing a rare moment in history. A quantum leap in the evolution of Mankind, right before your very eyes. Ted already knows what's on that tape, don't you?"

"Not word for word, but she was abducted, taken aboard a spaceship of some kind and they performed a medical or neurological exam that was none too pleasant, I would imagine." I sat back, waiting. "Then you guys have gone in pulled it all out of her and then scrambled the memory in such a way she won't remember any of it, even in her dreams. That is what's been going on, I believe. Flashbacks to the episode in her dream state as nightmares and she's been repressing them in her waking state. In fact, she spent so much time repressing them, she's lost contact with the day-to-day world. She's been working in overdrive just to maintain."

"I could give you all the medical terms for it, but you're right." Bellamy said. "It's no different than someone who's been raped. Forced to submit out of fear and probed, little Gray bastards pushing silver

instruments into every cavity and recess in her body. She's been defiled, degraded and humiliated beyond most people's endurance and then drugged up with something that will keep it out of her thoughts in the daytime. But the human mind works to recall these things out of survival, and that happens when our defenses are down, at night, when we sleep." Bellamy walked over and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Where did that come from?" Bellemy pointed at the folded diagram on the table.

"Two hours ago, I was alone in my office. A black janitor walked in and offered me a piece of gum. Then he handed me this and told me someone was looking out for me. Oh, did I mention I tried to shoot him in the head and the gun wouldn't fire?" Bellamy looked at Harv, who raised his hand in a gesture of resignation.

"I'll have a security team sweep the place from top to bottom and personally shoot anyone that let someone in there." Jack reached for the phone on the wall. He was reacting as my safety was his concern and he would ultimately be held responsible for anyone getting that close to me when I had been left alone for only a few hours.

"Don't bother, Jack. He was never here." I turned to where Bellamy was standing. "Was he George?"

"They come and go, without leaving a trace." He sat down at the end of the table. Rubbing his hands through his hair. "I've been meeting with one for the last three years. They have a rule of non-interference for the most part. But your guy is breaking the rules."

"Exactly what are we talking about?" Harv was turning redder by the moment. "He says some phantom was in his office and you start talking like he is the normal one in the room. Listen you two, I haven't slept in thirty hours. I just finished working over a wonderful gal in there that I happen to love as much as my own daughter. I had to listen to her say things that make me want to rip the guts out of the first alien son of a bitch I can lay my hands on and you two are talking like you would like to take them to a Yankee's game for hot clogs and beer. What the fuck?"

"Why? Do you want one?" Bellamy ignored the man, who threw up his hands and sat back folding his arms across his chest.

, "Are they living beings?"

Bellamy smiled sardonically at the question. "They are ...alive. By definition."

"Are they biological machines or computers?" I asked.'

"As close as we can figure, yes. They are programmed for certain functions. They operate on a group hive mentality with a shared consciousness and are simple constructs in their views." Bellamy pulled his pipe out and started to play with it.

"Do they reason?" I asked, probing deeper.

"No. They do not have that capacity. They have no concept of individuality or self. They have no moral structure or ethical principles to drive them. They are the closest thing we have ever seen to a living automated system. They have a life span of several years and they are created fully-grown. They have no genitals and are neither male nor female. They have no drive whatsoever except for the program that's running. Does that answer your questions without you having to tear one apart with your bare hands?" Bellamy looked up at me.

"Then who, exactly, went nuts at the Dulce Mesa? Down in the Hive? When I was grilling Tugy." My question hung in the air for a moment and then Harv reacted.

"Say that again ... very slowly." Harv looked at me.

"You heard him," Bellamy interrupted Harv sternly. "That is the question I've been laboring over for two years now. It doesn't make sense to me, either."

"They have no will, no volition of their own. So someone, or some thing, told them to take Ellen. They also figured by taking Ridgeway they'd throw us off track for a while longer. Then Charlie, the magical time travelling janitor shows up, with this," I pointed at the paper on the table, "and everything becomes crystal clear. Reversal! It's been staring me in the face for years! Reversal! My dad did it when he changed the size of his device, making it smaller. Kammler did the same and figured it out without ever telling his bosses. Simon Ratterman used it and disappeared into the timestream of our future or past. Our Friends did the same thing. We were going in one direction, the right direction and Tugy wanted to push us in another. That's why he ordered Ellen taken and why they took Ridgeway. He hoped we'd all start going down the wrong track, hunting down abductees and everybody taken aboard their ships. The exams mean nothing! They're all a misdirection, trying to keep us from asking the right questions."

"Have you ever felt like you walked into a movie half way through and missed the opening, so you don't know what the hell is going on?" Harv looked up at Jack.

"Often and tonight is one of those."

"I'll fill in the blanks for both of you later," Bellamy turned back to me. "What's our next move?"

"Make it work, and find out who *they* are," I offered up quietly.

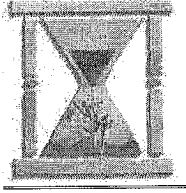
Bellamy raised an eyebrow. "Go inside the Hive?"

"All the way in." I got up and started to leave. "By the way, thank you. Both of you, for taking care of Ellen." I walked over to the room she was resting in. I sat down on the edge of the bed and held her hand. The nurse came in.

"She'll be out for hours. You look like you could use some sleep, too."
She told me.

"I am fine right here, thank you," she walked back out of the room.
"Right where I belong."

I kissed her hand and started to cry.



Chapter 5

Ellen was recovering from the whole ordeal at home. I'd spent a few days with her until she pushed me out of the house and back to work. She seemed to be recovering remarkably well. She told me she needed a few weeks to get the gumption up to come back on board at the laboratory and take back over her responsibilities. I patronized her about that issue, but it was pretty clear to me I didn't want her working on this right now. Somebody had taken the gloves off and this was going to be a bare knuckles fight if there ever was one, and I wanted her clear of it. The only chips on the table now were all black and I thought, right or wrong, this game was too rich for her blood.

Harv agreed to stay on and work the small device project for a week or so, until I was better able to concentrate on it and get it going forward in a fashion that would be acceptable to Bellamy. The lingering question for me right now, the mystery that consumed me, was what was in the pit at the Dulce Archeleta Mesa? What was down on Levels Green-4, Blue-5, Indigo-6 and Violet-7? Who was hitting our people so hard? And who were they and where were our "Visitors" really coming from?

The last two might be the hardest to answer. The first I resolved to find out even if I had to rip and tear that facility asunder with my bare hands with a team of crack Marine Raiders and Army Rangers. This was what I was thinking about when I pulled into the parking lot and saw the main hanger bay doors open. I parked and cleared security for the fourth time and walked over toward the hanger. Inside was a small group of men in business suits walking around the sleek silver Sport Model. The other craft were covered with silver tarpaulins and lashed down. Bellamy was walking the men around the craft.

Each had a pad and were furiously scribbling notes. Bellamy turned and greeted me. "Good morning." He smiled in his twisted sort of way. "How is Ellen?"

"Much better. We need to talk later, when we're alone.". I walked up to the group. Two of them turned and nodded without speaking, checking various surfaces and touching different parts of the craft.

"These gentlemen are with the Ravenswood group at Wright-Patterson. He thinks now that you've shown it can fly, they might be able to figure out some of the flight dynamics of the systems." He spoke without confidence.

"Great. I would love someone to tell me how it works in flight or on the ground." I excused myself and walked into the main building, after checking in with security. Harv was in the hallway, his hand wrapped around a coffee mug, speaking to Jack, who was already in his office.

"'Bout time you showed up, you goldbricker." Harv finished his last couple of sentences with Jack and followed me into my office.

"What is that all about?" I jerked my thumb toward the hanger bay.

"That, m'boy, is called politics. GB is making sure everyone is on the same page, so all of us can work off it. Those guys up at Wright-Pat are screaming bloody Jesus about funding going our way and the guy over in that house in DC is leaning heavy on the financial guys to account for every dime. We're playing along right now, but I promise you that peanut farming clown is not going to get re-elected. Seems like a lot of news coverage came out after your little joyride the other night and some folks in high places are being asked questions they don't want to answer. So, GB has turned it around; told them about the breakthrough we made and is trying to pour as much oil on the water as he can. That's why he's here, doing the clog and pony show." Harv splashed part of his coffee on the floor and never noticed.

"I really thought we were immune from any oversight." I sat down behind my desk after wiping up the coffee.

"Well, yes and no. Since we serve directly at the pleasure of the President, we have to make certain concessions now and then. This is one of those times." Harv laughed.

"He doesn't know anything about the rest of this does he?" I looked up at him.

"Oh, hell no!" Harv coughed while laughing and almost choked. "You think anybody is going to tell that Bible thumper we're dealing with your little gray pals or that we're working night and day to keep this planet in one piece? Shit, he'd be on his knees looking for divine guidance, wanting to meet with Lord Tugy to convert his ass to Jesus. Could you imagine that? No, we're handing them something everyone in the inner circle already knows about, so it's really no big deal. Your flight proved we're doing something with the craft nobody else has. That'll keep 'em off our backs long enough to get some kind of Right Wing Reactionary in that big White House who wants to bomb, pillage and plunder half the galaxy and look to us for the insight on how to do it."

"Since you mention bombing and pillaging, I have a serious question for you." I watched as Jack stepped in and leaned on the doorframe. He nodded to me and I waved at him.

"Dulce?" Harv asked after sitting in one of the two chairs across from me.

"How did you guess?" I smiled sardonically.

"A little birdie told me. Scarface himself out there has been waiting for you to ask. You probably want to take the Marine Corps third division down that hell hole and get some real answers." Harv put his coffee cup down and pulled his notebook out of his shirt pocket.

"Can we do it and get away with it?" I asked.

"I'll take point and lead the charge, boss." Jack smiled at me.

"You would? Shit," Harv snorted, "you would do about anything right now to get out of flying that desk across the hall. Probably get yourself shot up and expect someone to get you the Congressional Medal of Honor in the process," Harv looked up at the man. "I thought you worked for me and were supposed to do what I told you to do, no matter what." Harv was alluding to the task assigned to him to watch me and do whatever was necessary do what I told step over that invisible and non-defined line.

"Things change. So do people." Jack looked down hard at the man in the chair.

"Now you'd probably kill my ass, if he told you too," Harv pointed at me.

"I would think really hard on it, let's just leave it at that." Jack actually laughed out loud.

"This is a fine kettle of fish! Junior here wants to whack Tugy and company. You're supposed to make sure this young 'en stays in line, now you're ready to help him and *I'm* the bad guy? What happened? Did everyone get the memo 'cept me?" Harv picked up his coffee cup and acted hurt.

"*Can* we do it is the question, not *may* we. Should we do it just to get some answers?" I wanted to see Jack leading the raiding party with me right behind him. I found I was starting to hate certain things in the universe and wanted to strike out at them. I wanted them to feel the same fear at their front door that they had brought to ours. I wanted a few of them waking up nights, shaking in fear. I smelled pipe smoke coming down the hallway and Bellamy walked up and touched Jack to stand easy.

"Yes, but we need to plan it very carefully." Bellamy looked down at Harv and then back at me. "I am working out the details and we will all sit down and shred the plan until we have it airtight. Then we will execute it."

"I wanted you to tell him," Harv smiled to himself.

"I know. We all walked away the other night from your insightful questions and had to do some soul searching as to why we had not tumbled to this before. If Tugy's their leader, there should never be a protest of any kind from them. If he is their front man, then who, indeed, is in the Pit? You said something else that got me thinking. 'Reversal'. That was the term you used. What if someone decided to do to all of us what we have done here? Ratterman, and that bitch, Ann Corbett; they could be working for someone who has given them protection, assistance and aid in the process. So what we have been told is not the case at all, but some other group is working down in the hole at Dulce, and doing something far different than their stated, or agreed to, purpose," Bellamy looked out and down the hallway to make sure no one was there. "If that is the case then who is 'Charlie the Magic Janitor' working for? And why is someone so interested in making sure you are alive and well, as well as working on a small version of the device." He pointed at me. "It doesn't serve certain people's interest, that much is clear; so we have to assume there are two or three groups playing us against the middle." He paused and collected his thoughts.

"Two or three?" I asked.

"Yes. Ever listen to Paul Harvey? He always closes with the phrase, 'And that is the rest of the story'." Bellamy smiled to himself. "So this is the rest of the story for me. I've been meeting with a representative from another group of 'Travelers', as they call themselves, interested in the welfare of the local universe around these parts. They cannot get involved, but they can warn and assist us up to the point of violating a protocol established by some other, more powerful, group. That much I know. He comes and goes occasionally, offering me tidbits of information. Much like your visitor, Charlie, he's benign and only wants to help us. I saw him recently and asked some pointed questions about our neighbors in New Mexico at Dulce. He was reluctant to align himself with our effort, but then conceded that if we did have a battle engagement, it was his position there would be no retaliation, since that would upset the delicate balance of power." Bellamy waited for reactions. "He assured me the evidence would be...revealing."

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?" Harv looked up dumbfounded.

"That the Colony or Hive at Dulce is not made up of Grays, doing genetic research." I offered up, a point I'd already gotten to.

"Then what the hell are they doing?" Jack interjected.

I looked at Bellamy long and hard, considering my next sentence very carefully.

"They are processing and storing," I said without hearing how hard the words came out.

"I think so." Bellamy answered with anger in his eyes.

"Is this going to be another one of those conversations where you two talk in Aramaic and Jack and I sit here looking ignorant?" Harv added.

"They're the front team, setting up supply depots for a landing they're planning in a few years and they're preparing for their people." I didn't acknowledge Harv's comments at all.

"They've been at it for almost twenty years and they've got another thirty-two or so to go. Fifty years of supplies. Enough to keep a lot of beings going for years of deep space travel," Bellamy actually winced.

"Raiders. Boat people, like the ones living in Hong Kong harbor. Always on the move, stripping one place and heading out towards another. They send in a team that sets up the center and then stores materials all over the planet in expectation of the arrival. It's not energy or water or power they need." I stopped, stuttering at the ominous nature of the logic trail, and where it was heading.

"Raiders? Boat People? What are you guys talking about?" Harv looked bewildered. Jack wasn't doing much better and then I saw the spark hit him like a bullet between the eyes.

"To *Serve Man!*" The Twilight Zone episode, we all knew; a story about aliens coming to this world and taking us to their home to serve us up as dinner.

"You're telling me they're taking people off the streets and not returning them? The treaty was about taking some here and there, removing genetic material, then putting them back, wasn't it?" Harv's eyes were tightening.

"It was, and we've been living under the belief this is what they've been doing, but I am with Ted at this point. I think they're canning us down there for a future group to use, as food stuffs for their invasion and then their next journey." Bellamy stood up straight and put his pipe away.

"We've got to know the truth." I looked at GB.

"We will. But none of you are going in there, is that clear? Not until we have complete and total control of that place." Bellamy turned and walked away down the hall.

"Jesus H. Kee-Rist in a fuzzy sweater! The man drops a bombshell like that and walks away?" Harv got up and headed out into the hallway after him.

"That doesn't help us here, does it, Ted?" Jack sat down in the chair Harv vacated.

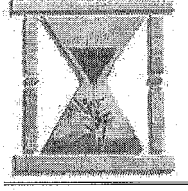
"No. We still need to close the holes in space/time, and make sure we can defend ourselves against whatever is coming our way." I rubbed my eyes. "There's just one little problem we need to address. The big ones are how do we patch up the holes and get a system airborne that will

protect us. Then we need to find out who is going around sticking these little gadgets in the back of our necks?"

"Which one do we do first?" Jack took a cigarette out of his pack and then dropped it back in.

He pulled out a piece of gum from his pocket and unwrapped it.

"The Device. It has been and should be our first priority," I nodded to him and started going through the stack of papers on my desk.



Chapter 6

Someone once said; *"Time flies when you're having fun"*. My own take on that old axiom is: *"Time flies when you're up to your ass in alligators and trying to tread water at the same time."*

Dr. Harvey Gilpsen had been gone for six months with just the random phone call to ask how we were progressing on the device. I had not even been in the hanger bay to look at the ships. Bellamy had been silent as a tomb out on his Cayman island paradise and somehow during this period I started to feel I was no longer in the Third Boss position. Jack was pulling double duty, flying his desk and covering all of the material usually handled by Ellen. She was home doing whatever it was she occupied her time with during the long hot days of summer. I was sure the magazine bill she ran up would pay for half the national debt. No one could read that many fashion, women's and general interest articles and remain sane. But she was making a herculean attempt to prove me wrong. Sitting by the pool, she'd deepened her tan by a major percentage and each night I went home, she was doing the best Donna Reed impersonation I'd ever seen.

Most surprising was the fact she never asked about what we were doing at the lab, with the exception of random and relatively unimportant personal questions about this person or that. She was sweet, kind, considerate and ...vacant. I had what most men would consider the perfect wife. Never demanding, always understanding, accommodating to a fault and always there waiting at the door with a kiss and a drink in her hand. Jack was still with me most of the time. But when we got to the house, he would head over to his section in the separate wing and joined us very seldom for dinners or drinks or much of anything. I should have been happy. But I wasn't.

The Device was progressing, but like all major scientific projects that require huge inputs of money, time and resources in regards to personnel, this one was moving along on schedule and in the dull tedium of making sure every resistor, capacitor and gauge of wire was correct, it was taking its toll on me. Our first scheduled run up of the Device was well over a

year away and yet there was a ton of paperwork that had to be done every day to insure all the tees were crossed and the eyes dotted.

I found the cocktail at night before dinner was turning into two or three and the after dinner drink was becoming four or five. I was falling into bed by ten without caring if Ellen was next to me or not. She would stay up at night and watch Johnny Carson in the living room and then sometimes, actually most of the time, watch a late movie afterwards. Each morning I was up and gone before she was out of bed. A gentle kiss on her shoulder and I was out the door.

I'd become a normal every day working stiff who just so happened to be working on the most important and interesting projects in the country, the world or for that matter in the history of the Human Race, and I really didn't care.

Now and then the discussion would come up about having a child. She thought it be would nice to have one. I never said anything, but I thought she and I would probably be better off getting a dog. I had two children; one I had never seen and the other I would probably never see again. That pain was enough to keep me from ever wanting another. Besides, I had gone to the base physician and had a series of tests for a recurring pain in my groin. The results were something that I didn't want to tell anyone, but someplace along the path I had been on, I'd been exposed to enough radiation to impair my reproductive ability. I thought of the clay at Dulce when Jack and I met with Tugy after the firefight and realized that, knowingly or unwittingly, they'd exposed us to a large enough dosage of radiation to make sure that neither of us would ever have children again. Jack told me he had the same results on his tests, after I'd asked him to go in for a routine exam. The motility factor was almost nonexistent in both of us. Jack never spoke about it, being the good soldier he was, it was just another injury in a campaign, in a war no one else would ever be aware of.

I spent the afternoons in my office with the door closed, reading and re-reading my father's journals. All of them. I was trying to find what was not written on the pages, things that were spoken of between the lines. I was searching for his frustration and how he coped with being out of the circle of power, when he was conducting research out in the desert by himself. Things were still not adding up. His knowledge of the project was so deep and extensive he had to know others would be working on the same thing, yet he never talked to anyone about it.

I had a staff of over a hundred scientists and related staff working away on something that was about the size of a shoe box and they were talking about five year programs to me.

With each reading of his journals, I became more certain that dad was working with someone else. His insights would make quantum

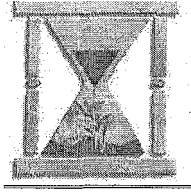
jumps and then a whole new part of the device would be added. The notes never reflected the actual building of anything, but rather were filled with notes on theory, that could be translated into a working device, but something was missing; there had to be another journal, somewhere. The one that was the lab manual on how he was constructing the device itself. I wondered if someone had taken it and if that was why he went missing or, an even more wild thought, that he'd just taken it with him.

That was the day everything stopped for me. I was still under the belief that he had left, physically or through some time manipulation he had engineered. Never once, in all these years, did I think he was just lying out in the desert decomposing in a shallow grave where someone had tossed his lifeless corpse. My hypothesis had not been built on facts at all. I'd always presumed he was still alive somewhere. But on that summer day in 1980, I realized for the first time that he might, actually, be...dead.

I felt as though a ton of hard, square, red material had just been dropped on me. Everything I'd done, all my life, was secretly about finding him. I didn't realize it, for the most part, until that afternoon, but then slowly the thought took form and I realized in so many ways that I'd sidetracked my own career and my own *life*, to follow a dream, or worse, an illusion, that might not be real.

Leaving the building without checking out with security, I walked in the hundred plus heat over towards the old test airstrip that sat a quarter of a mile from our laboratory. I put one foot in front of the other and walked the length of the seven-mile runway. I was only partially aware of the heat, the sun and the immense desert that surrounded this place.

I wasn't sure where I was going, but I knew that now I had a new destination.



Chapter 7

Harv sat in the corner of the room reading a chart, when I opened my eyes. The shaded cream light of the Venetian blinds over the windows still dazzled me. The place had that pungent stinging smell of antiseptics. I laid in bed, my eyes barely open squinting over at the form in the chair.

"Hi, Harv," I mumbled through the haze of drugs coursing through my system.

"Hi, my ass!" He looked up and closed the metal lid on the chart clipboard in his chubby hands. "What exactly was this stunt about anyway?"

"What stunt?" My mouth was really dry and I could feel my lips were cracked and hurt.

"What stunt?", he asks?" Harv got up and walked over to the sidetable and helped me get a drink out of the glass with the funny little bent white straw. The water felt cold going down my throat. Lying back I realized I was in a hospital room, again. Harv pushed the button on the control to raise the bed slightly, then pulled his chair over.

"I got better things to do with my life, than be here in the middle of the goddamn desert, playing nursemaid to you. I could be laying on some beach in Puerto Rico with a middle aged nineteen year old, soaking up the sun and sucking clown cute little foofy umbrella drinks."

"Harv, you've never sat on a beach ... in your life! You and I both know that. Besides," I moved a little to re-adjust myself to look around, "you don't like foo-foo drinks."

"Okay, but I still could be with some woman that likes me!" Harv twisted up his face.

"That'd be a first," I joked.

"Hey!" Harv stuck out his lower lip in a pout.

"Why am I here?" I started to move my arms and realized I had two feeder tubes stuck in me, coming out of two plastic bags hanging from a stand next to the bed.

" 'Cause you're a dumb bastard who decided to take a walk out in the middle of the most inhospitable desert in North America in a 110 degree heat, without a hat, water or telling anyone where you went. What were

you thinking about, son? Were you trying to escape the misery of being a married man, 'cause you've no other reason to off yourself," Harv actually looked concerned as he patted my arm.

"No. I just went for a walk to clear my head," I didn't know what time it was or even what day at this point.

"Hell of a walk. You might want to consider running in the Boston Marathon next year," Harv chuckled then quashed his humor.

"Why do you say that?" I took the glass and lost the straw, just drinking it straight out of the glass.

"It took the team out here a good seven hours to find you and when they did you were over on the Nellis bombing range, sprawled out on the ground, cooking like a frankfurter. It had to be sixteen or seventeen miles from the lab," Harv sat back and blew out breath between his lips that made a flapping sound. "The sawbones in this place thought you'd fried your brain completely. Your core temp was 104° and they had to pack you in ice for two days just to get you back down to normal. Everyone was sure as hell that if you did live, you'd be one of those guys like Howard Hughes pissing in milk bottles, watching old black and white movies in a locked room, wearing an aluminum foil hat to keep the cosmic rays from getting into your mind," Harv rubbed his face.

"How long have you been here?" I looked at him. He was looking older and more haggard than I had seen him in the past.

"Seven days. From the time they found you. A couple of days ago the doctors shot you up with morphine just to get you to shut up. You started talking and yelling. Mostly in Russian. After a few hours of that, they figured your brain was still functioning. Impaired but functioning so they hit you with that stuff and you've slept until now." Harv hit the nurse's call button. A male nurse in whites stepped in and looked first at me then Harv. "I need a cup of coffee, black and bring my nephew here some more water," Harv barked.

"I will also call the doctor," the nurse added.

"Don't bother him. I need to spend some time talking with Dr. Humphrey without anyone bothering us, understood?" Harv looked really hard at the younger man in the doorway.

"Yes, sir." Knowing this was not the time to challenge anyone of Harv's status the door closed and the nurse was gone.

"I was speaking in Russian?" I looked in disbelief at Harv.

"Yeap. I had it taped and got the transcript right here." He tapped the clipboard on his lap.

"Pretty interesting stuff as well. Sounds to me like you were having a conversation with a certain ...someone," Harv went silent as the nurse came back into the room with the coffee and a thermos filled with water.

"Irina?" I drank some water. It tasted of antiseptic.

"Seems to me that's the case. But unlike most hallucinations, it's not a one-way dialog. You were answering and asking questions," Harv sipped his coffee and put it down with a sour face. "These guys don't know coffee from horse piss."

"What was I talking to her about?" I held my breath.

"Besides all the mushy stuff, which needs to be deleted from these transcripts or sold to Grove Press for their next porno novel, it's mostly about your father and his work on the device," Harv sat there looking perplexed.

"Where's Ellen?" I asked.

"She had to head to the Caymans to make arrangements and then onto London. Sir Charles died and she had to go. A formal state funeral is being planned in London and she needed to be there. Seems like the old boy just toppled over dead. PLAM! Some big long name for it, but it was sudden and nobody had any idea that he was about ready to check out. They held it yesterday and she's planning to stay on there for a while until matters are sorted out," Harv picked his coffee cup back up and tried it again, with the same disappointment as before.

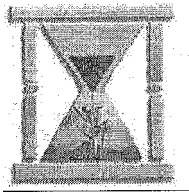
"You don't seem overly disconcerted about it, Harv?" I questioned him.

"Didn't really care for the old buzzard. He was needed and I tolerated him more for Ellen's sake than anything else, but just didn't really warm to the man very much. Don't think anyone ever did, fucking British bastard! He was good as a front guy for the operation, but we need to figure out who's going to replace him on the island without a bunch of questions being asked." Harv got up and patted my arm again like a good Cocker Spaniel.

"Get some rest and we'll talk in a day or so." He shambled towards the door.

"What else did I say while I was out?" I knew something else had transpired, which Harv was reluctant to speak of.

"We will talk about it later. Right now, enjoy your vacation in here. If you can stand the food." Harv, slipped his old tweed jacket on, picked up his clipboard and walked out the door. I knew I should feel something. But I just closed my eyes and drifted off into sleep again.



CHAPTER 8

The phone rang and rang when finally a nasally male voice answered asking me my business. "I am calling to speak with Ellen. Ellen Humphrey?" I was a little miffed, to say the least.

"Her Ladyship is not taking calls today, sir." The voice was used to speaking down to people.

"She will take this one; this is her husband." I found not hearing anything from her with the exception of receiving an arrangement of flowers with a simple note of getting well, in the hospital room, had got my back up a little.

"Oh. Dr. Humphrey. Excuse me but not having spoken to you before, I was not aware from your voice that you were he." The voice used a proper form of English that I was completely unused to.

"Great, now you have heard me, so put her on the line, please." I didn't like this guy whoever he was and didn't care if he knew it or not.

"Just a moment please." Silence and the occasional cracking sound came down the phone line from England.

I sat in my office and waited. I had been out of the base hospital for a day. Going through the backlog on my desk and having to sort out my own thoughts had been a pain, in and of itself. That was the lie I had told myself, but I knew already something major had happened, and I just wanted to find out if my instincts were justified.

"Dr. Humphrey, this is Oliver Heath-Smyth, Esquire. I am your wife's attorney here in London, sir." The voice was mellow and flowing on the phone.

"Okay, Mr. Smith." I wondered if she had a live in lawyer with her. I looked at my watch and realized it was nine at night in London.

"Heath-Smyth, sir. It is Heath-Smyth. Anyway, her Ladyship asked me to represent her in this matter," he went on. "It seems as though Ellen, if I may be informal with you, has decided it would be better if she stayed in England for a while."

"So that means that she doesn't want to speak with me?" I almost laughed.

"Well, that is correct. I shall be drawing up papers shortly and filing them with the high court here as well as handling the estate matters." The man rambled on.

"Alright, you are handling Sir Charles's estate, so what the hell does that have to do with me talking to my wife?" I started to get really angry.

"Well ... it is not just the estate, Dr. Humphrey. It is also a divorce that her Ladyship desires." He paused for a moment waiting for a response. I sat there neither shocked nor dismayed. Something way back in my head had told me this was a possibility and that Ellen and I had been living a lie during our short tenure together. "I was under the understanding that you knew about it?"

"Just send me the papers, Mr. *Smith*, and give my best to Ellen." I hung up and looked up to see Jack standing in the doorway.

"Did you know about any of this?" I asked him without anger or dismay.

"About what boss? I was just going to ask you if you wanted to have some lunch," Jack backed out into the hallway.

"I just talked to my wife's lawyer and it seems like she wants to call the marriage over and done." I sat there looking back at the black phone on my desk.

"I didn't, Ted," Jack pulled out a cigarette and lit up. "Did she say why?"

"She won't even talk to me, Jack." I turned and looked back at him. I could tell the wheels were rolling around inside his skull. "Where?" "Where what?" He rubbed his thumb across his lips while thinking. "Where do you want to have lunch?" I got up and picked up my jacket.

"Over at Dreamland. But I can understand if..." he trailed off.

"What the heck is Dreamland?" I walked out into the hallway, shutting and locking the door behind me.

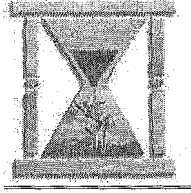
"It's over at Five-One. That's what the boys call it over there now. Stands for: Defense Research and Experimental Advanced Mechanics, land. Catchy, eh? Like a section at Disneyworld. It's where they're working on some high-tech aircraft that has something they call 'stealth technology', makes the birds invisible to radar." Jack walked into his office and picked up his jacket and pulled his automatic out of the drawer in his desk.

"Think you will be needing that?" I laughed at my own words.

"You just never know, boss. You just never know." We walked out to reception and grabbed a car. The drive over the ten miles of private road was a quiet.

PART TWO

OPERATION:
DOUBLE AGENT



Chapter 9

Hiding away off the edge of a runway was a very nice cafeteria. It was on the second floor of a hanger building and had a long five-star buffet lined with all kinds of interesting and wonderful foods that would have been the envy of every hotel in Las Vegas. I went down the line and picked up a couple of items and sat down at a corner table overlooking the seven miles of black runway.

A few groups of men in white shirts with ID badges sat at various tables chatting and eating. Jack joined me and set his tray down on the table.

"They have it pretty nice here. I get tired of the mom and pop operation we have over at our place." Jack motioned to the runway. "They're doing a ramp run up today. One of the guys here I've known since my college days at USC, and he called me. They really don't like outsiders here, but we have clearance way above these guys." He motioned to the groups sitting around behind us. "Nobody is going to even ask where we're from. The pleasures of power," he smiled to himself.

A black, rubbery looking aircraft with a completely different design than anything I'd ever seen before, came out of a darkened hanger and rolled up the ramp.

"Is that it?" I pointed to the aircraft, which looked more like a flying wedge.

"That's her. They call it the Night Hawk-F-117. Completely built out of composite material and light alloys. All weather fighter and bomber." Jack had stopped eating and was watching the craft taxi up the ramp.

"Where did they build that? I haven't see anything in the trade journals." I was really interested in the design.

"Up at the Skunk Works in the desert north of here. Private contract, but the stuff is pure science fiction on the inside. Uses two different computers just to fly," Jack was clearly impressed.

"Why do you think she bailed?" I asked watching the airplane move out onto the main runway.

"Scared I imagine. Didn't want to go through another episode like Taos. I listened to those tapes. I don't blame her. If she has any memory, or worse a lack of memory, about it, I think that'd traumatize just about anyone." Jack turned back to me and pushed his plate away. "You want to hit something or yell at me or should we just punch the shit out of a couple of these eggheads over at one of the tables?"

"That's the problem, Jack. I don't feel. ..anything. It's not like I'm numb, it's that. ..I just don't care. When I wandered off two weeks ago, I don't know if I was trying to kill myself in the desert or just run away from everything, like, mostly, my empty life I was going home to every night. Or the realization finally hitting me that my dad is dead, and if he is, then what is the point of all this? I think I snapped because I felt like it was all the end of hope for me. Ellen was just at effect of all that, on top of what happened to her."

"Ellen said to me once she thought you married her on the rebound from Irina. She believed that you still loved her. Complex. Women are very complex. Far more so than anything we have to deal with here." Jack turned and looked at the aircraft again.

"What is the report going to look like when you write it up, Jack? Dr. Humphrey is becoming unstable and should be replaced?" I laughed to myself about the irony of all of it.

"There isn't going to be any report. If you're up to it I got something I have orders to show you, if you want some answers. I just don't know if now is the right time." Jack pulled out another cigarette and then slowly pushed it back into the package.

"What do you want me look at?" I found my basic curiosity was catching back a hold of me.

"Listen, Ted," Jack said, squaring his shoulders and leaning in close to me. "I have something I need to say to you. I don't want to have this conversation again. Ever. But right now I'm not speaking as a member of The Group but as your friend. Every one of us has our nightmares. We all go through questioning ourselves as to the rights and wrongs of this business, trying to maintain an even keel. You took a walk the other day. Every one of us has done something dumb while we've been with this operation. I've sat up nights looking at my .45 Colt thinking about putting it in my mouth and painting the ceiling with my brains. Harv went on a mad drunken binge once that lasted weeks in Rio. Jesus, we pulled him out of some god-awful bordello in the worst part of town. Bellamy's been on prescribed anti-depressants on and off for ten years. So don't think you're some kind of isolated case. We just all know it comes with the territory.

"Ellen," he shrugged, "well, that is a horse of a different color. I have my opinions, but they don't matter. I will sit up late with you and listen to

you rant and rave if that's what you need or I'll never mention her again. But mostly," he got close and poked me in the chest for emphasis, "I'm your goddamn friend and I will support whatever you need to do to get through this." Jack sat back.

"Thanks Jack, but I am okay now." I rubbed my face hard and let out a heavy sigh. "Two weeks ago I came to an understanding of something that hounded me for years. It was one of those things that comes along in life where you really don't know which cabinet to put it in."

"Good enough for me. Let's go!" Jack slapped the table. "I think you'll be interested in what I have to show you." He got up and, for no reason at all, extended his hand. I took it and we shook hands. It affected me in a way I didn't understand. I don't know why but it all suddenly seemed all right to be me again. Ellen would have to do what she needed to do for herself. I couldn't blame her. But now I needed to do what was right for me. I followed Jack out and clown a long corridor.

In building D-12 of the facility, now known as D.R.E.A.M.-land, we took two different elevators down to a fourth level sub-basement. The hallway exited straight out toward a door flanked by two very solid looking air security officers. They were standing behind a bullet and explosion proof glass partition. As we approached red lights recessed into the ceiling started to revolve and blink.

"Don't make any sudden moves, Ted," Jack said under his breath, "these guys will fill this hallway with enough gas to kill a herd of rhino."

"That's comforting," I said as one of the men slid out a tray and spoke through an amplified speaker, demonstrating they were not in direct air contact with the hall.

"Please set your passes clown and step back." The other man had his hand on a red button on a console in front of him.

I took my ID badge and set it down on the tray. Jack slowly reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out two other cards besides his own badge. I noticed as he laid them on the tray that one of the badges had my picture on it.

"What's up with that?" I asked as we stepped back.

"It's your White House ID card. From now on, you also carry that with you at all times. You, my friend, now have access to everything in this country, no questions asked. Use it wisely."

"Sir," the airman placed the cards back on the tray and slid them back out. "Please look into the retinal scanner on your right."

Jack looked into a device with a soft shining red laser light then motioned for me to do the same. I noticed a slight irritation in my eye as the light quickly passed from left to right and then up to down.

"When did somebody get my scan?"

"I took it while you were out in the hospital," Jack stepped back and waited as the security officer examined the results.

"Great. I was hoping you had some Polaroids of me in bed with a bunch of nurses dancing around me."

"We did. Just wait till the Christmas party." Jack deadpanned.

I looked at my new ID card, noticing part of it was in a symbolic language. I had no idea what it was or what it meant.

"Elevator locked and secured," said the guard with his hand on the button as he moved to another console.

"Secured." The first man responded. An alarm sounded.

"Pressurizing chamber." The man spoke out to the other.

"Depressurize your ears." Jack said to me.

"What do mean?" Then I felt it as the air pressure increased.

"Yawn." Jack was opening and closing his mouth to relieve the pressure increasing on his eardrums. I followed suit.

"Sixteen point five PSI. The room is positively pressurized so nothing can be sucked into it by accident." A whole section of wall moved sideways. Jack stepped through the opening and I followed. He placed a hand on my chest just inside the opening and the door slid closed. We stood inside the room in the dark. After the door was completely closed, bank upon bank of recessed tube lighting came on, running the length of the room. It was huge and absolutely silent. I could hear my heart beating in my ears. In front of me were several cubicles and then a doorway leading into another room. The room was all glass, floor to ceiling. The walls were lined with blast proof file cabinets reenforced with lead and cement between the outside and inside metal. I tried to move one of these years before into my office in New York and realized, very quickly, it took a crane to lift one of them. They were designed to withstand a direct hit from any kind of explosive up to a nuke.

"You are now in the belly of the beast, Ted. Less than twenty men in the world can come in here. I've only been here, in this part, once before, with Bellamy." Jack stood as if waiting for something else electronic to happen.

"Are we just here looking or are we doing something here?" I was amazed because this did not look much different than most of the area of my complex.

"Just a minute, please," Jack waited and sighed.

"Gentlemen?" An old man came out of one of the side rooms. He was dressed in a blue sport coat and polo shirt.

"This is Dr. Humphrey. I believe you have him on your list." There were no introductions.

"Yes, I do." He turned and walked toward the distant room with the glass walls.

I gestured to Jack, asking who this was.

"This is Mr. Rafferty. He is the custodian of records here. He will get you anything you want." I followed him and Jack stopped.

"Is there something wrong?" I turned to Jack and looked at him.

"I am not cleared to go in there. Only this far," Jack leaned up against the wall.

"Then let's get out of here," I walked back to him and Mr. Rafferty turned around.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but there is an understanding that only you, Dr. Humphrey, were to be given access." The man seemed annoyed.

"Bullshit. Take a look at my ID and call whomever it is you call and get it cleared. Jack goes in with me or I don't go. I need his help." I was truly pissed off at all the cloak and dagger stuff these guys lived for.

"This is most irregular, gentlemen. I have my instructions. Now either you want in or you don't, sir." Rafferty finally hit the tilt button in my brain and my last nerve snapped.

"Listen up, BUDDY! Do you know who I am? I am one of the guys with my finger on the button! So you go find a secure phone and call Bellamy or Harvey Gilpsen or the President, I really don't give a good goddamn who you call! But Jack Thompson is in this as deep as I am, so get him cleared and stop jacking me around. How much clearer do I have to be?" I considered what it would be like to go back to academia and teach. I was seeing clearer all the time why my old man decided to go it alone in Barstow. A door behind us opened and another security officer stepped in with his weapon drawn.

"Whoa! What?" I yelled at him. "Don't you have something better to do or are you bucking for a position on an Arctic re-fueling team?"

"Ease up, Ted. These guys are a little different down here," Jack was showing his nervousness and I understood it. I was running a bluff myself but I wanted to see if someone was going to call my bet or not.

Behind the air security officer a one-star general walked in and straight up to Rafferty. "There's a call on the blue line," he turned to us as Rafferty walked into the office he had come from.

"Jack, good to see you," the General extended his hand and they shook.

"General Clarke, I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Humphrey." The man turned to me and nodded.

"Doctor Humphrey. A pleasure. I am sorry as hell for this mix up. Some of my folks are a little tricky to deal with here. They have orders and we enforce them fairly rigidly." He motioned to the air security man to return to his post.

"Normally, staff line officers, even though they're assigned to one of the Group members aren't allowed in the vault for security reasons. It's

protocol. Someone thought it was the best way to keep a tight handle on the information in there." He was a cordial man who could probably be one very nasty character if it was needed.

"My problem with all of that General is I am one of the people that makes the rules, in case anybody hadn't noticed lately." I was still wound up and not giving in to any pressure whether it was overt or sugar coated.

"Well, yes, I understand that, but there's a standing order we must comply with under all circumstances." The General had less of a smile.

"Let's go, Jack." I turned and started for the door. "Somebody get this piece of shit open for me right now!" I yelled and hit the door with my hand.

"Ted!" Jack pleaded, looking a little green around the gills at the moment.

"No, Major Thompson. I'm not playing this stupid little game. I am making one phone call and this place is going to be a bad memory! And everyone working here is going to be in an unemployment line. How clear do I have to make it? Now get this goddamn door open! That, sir, is a direct order!" I yelled again.

"Sir!" Jack jumped and hit the intercom on the wall.

"I don't think this kind of behavior can be tolerated..." the General started and I whirled, stepped in, raped his personal space, and lost my mind.

"Shut your goddamn mouth! Right FUCKING NOW! Do NOT dig your grave any deeper! It has been a lousy day and I promise you it is going to be worse than you can EVEN IMAGINE before it is over!" I glared at the man. The rage of Ellen, the desert episode and the whole nightmare I was embroiled in reached its breaking point and right about now I was planning how I was going to exercise all the executive power I controlled.

A loud speaker crackled to life in the ceiling.

"Dr. Humphrey. This is Boss One in the Hole."

I'd been correct in my present hypothesis that the man had insomnia and lived in Studio Control on the island and had been watching.

"Sir?" I responded.

"I can see you on the closed circuit camera to your right on the ceiling. Unfortunately, this is a one-way system so you cannot see me..." there was a pause, "laughing my ass off at this melodrama being played out before my eyes. Very entertaining!" I heard him clapping.

"Gee, GB, I'm delighted you find my problems so AMUSING!"

"No problems at all, Ted," Bellamy chuckled. "Jack, have the orders cut or everyone working there is on the first plane for Diego Garcia. Clarke!" The voice boomed out of the loudspeaker like an angry native god.

"Sir!" He faced the camera and snapped to attention.

"You know that second star you're hoping for? Well, it hangs in the balance of the next fifteen seconds of your life. You hold your future, my man, in the palm of your hand. It is either that or demotion and forced retirement as a colonel after three years of detached service on some atoll no one can find on a map. I don't need to be bothered with this kind of crap and every one of you there knows this. I don't care if Dr. Humphrey wants to take your maiden aunt, two Vegas hookers, a midget, a sheep, a pretty pony and a birthday clown into that room. If he wants it, he better get it and no one, and I mean NO ONE better call me again! Can I make that any clearer for you?" I smiled, looking down at the floor. Funny how you can sometimes run a bluff and win.

"Sir, I-I just thought..." Both Jack and I winced that his response was anything other than 'Sir! Yes Sir!' It was coming out badly and no amount of back peddling was going to save the day for the General. He was done for, and, now that Bellamy was involved, I actually started to feel sorry for him.

"Ted? Call the spot. You want a sweep team in there now? I got Delta on hold, topside," Bellamy was using his best 'everyone's angry dad' voice. Rafferty ran out of the office, waving a paper at the General.

"It's alright, General Clarke! Dr. Humphrey can..." he noticed the General looking up at the red light on the camera. Rafferty went pale. "Oh, my!"

"That's alright, Boss One. Call off the shooters. I think Mr. Rafferty has found the information we need." I looked at the older man.

"I am sorry, gentlemen. I didn't realize the situation had changed. General Clarke, thank you for being here, but I can handle this now," Rafferty looked like a man beside himself.

The General turned and looked at me hard. Everything inside him wanted to knock out my teeth, but prudence, and the thought of losing the next star on his shoulder, prevailed.

"I am certain this is just a misunderstanding, as you can well understand. But we must be so careful ..." I cut him off as I had no more pity for him. A man this dumb deserved to go down.

"Is that supposed to be an apology?" The statement dripped with sarcasm.

It took three deep breaths for the man to regain some degree of control and he glanced up at the red light on the camera glaring down at him, like the baleful eye of God.

"I am sorry for the actions of my staff and myself, Dr. Humphrey. I am sure it will not happen again." He got it right this time.

"Oh, I can completely guarantee that, General Clarke." I was not letting him off my hook that easily. Let him spend a couple of days

waiting for the guys to show up with his new orders or, worse, the one-way ride out to the old small arms range, where he would be the 'target of opportunity', which is how they did things out here.

"Now is someone going to open that room for Major Thompson and I?" I turned to Rafferty who was hurrying towards it.

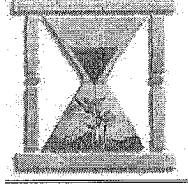
"Yes sir. I am. Yes, I am!" Rafferty hit buttons and the glass door slid to one-side and we walked into a pleasant, comfortable climate controlled air-conditioned room with leather chairs and a walnut table. Rafferty unlocked certain file cabinets, passing two of them, leaving them locked.

"All of them please," I added, for no other reason than to see if he would do it.

Rafferty turned and looked at me as if to say something, then nodded in fear and removed all the locks. Jack sat down, pulled out a cigarette, tossed me the pack and I helped myself.

"Ah, this facility has a strict no smo ..." Rafferty froze as Jack and I looked over at him. "I mean ...I will get you gentlemen some ashtrays."

"And a pot of coffee, too, while you are at it, Raffy, old buddy." I smiled. "Maybe you can see if he can bring you a birthday clown," Jack mumbled,



CHAPTER 10

The coffee and ashtrays were there when the telephone in the center of the desk rang. Jack pushed the speakerphone.

"What exactly are you two Bozos doing out there?" Harv's voice boomed into the room. "I just got one of those wonderful calls from Scarface who was just delighted to take the leading role in this little party of yours. He has so little joy in his dark, evil life. So thank you for that at least."

"Did you know Ellen was divorcing me, Harv?" Silence hung in the room like a London fog. "Ahhh, c'mon! Seriously?" I said throwing up my hands. "You rat bastard! You ALL knew and didn't tell me?"

"She told me a week ago, when she left. She just didn't like the idea of being married," Harv sounded heavier than normal as he wheezed through the phone.

"Could have given me a head's up on that one old pal, don't ya think?" I was still miffed to say the least.

"Not my place, nephew. Anyway, you weren't having a whole hell of a lot of fun being married to her now, were you?" He chuckled, actually chuckled, at my misfortune.

"Now that is what I like; compassion and caring," I steamed.

"No time for it, Sunny Jim. The clock is running and we're losing the race. Women come and go, the future is set in stone." Harv was no longer laughing.

"I want Jack completely in on this. He isn't a fixture on the outside of our glee club. So what do I have to do to make that so?" Jack looked at me with frightened shock and disbelief, which I didn't understand, as he waived the palms of his hands at me, mouthing 'NO!'

"Jack?" Harv yelled clown the phone at us.

Jack cleared his throat nervously. "Boss?"

"This what you want?" Harv was his hard professional self-right now. "This is the whole enchilada, red sauce, sour cream and the little green stuff on the side."

"I am placed in a compromised situation here, Harv. If I take it, I can't serve as escort for Ted anymore," Jack was buying himself time to think, the wheels spinning in his head, as he shook his fist at me.

"Tell me something I don't know?" Harv barked.

Jack closed his eyes, took a deep breath and for the first time I had known him, he actually looked afraid, and I didn't know why.

"Yes," he said at last. "If I am good enough for it."

"Boss Three, are you sure?" Harv already knew the answer, but I was certain someone else was listening.

"I wouldn't ask if I wasn't sure," I said. There was a long pause while Harv hit the mute button and conferred with another member of the team that I was sure was listening to every word.

"Call sign: Boss Nine. Confirm!" Harv yelled again.

"Confirmed." Jack's voice cracked with emotion.

"The papers will be sitting on your desk when you two renegade Injuns get back to your own reservation. Now, just read what you need to and get the hell out of there, before Bellamy gets really pissed and has Delta Team start zipping people into body bags for Christsakes." We could hear Harv slurping his coffee and stuffing a donut in his face.

"Approved," Bellamy's voice chimed in on the open circuit. "Your retirement papers are being processed as we speak, Jack. A new level seven pay grade is in place. Exchange ID cards as soon as it's convenient," a momentary pause in the transmission. "Start in cabinet three, top draw and work backwards. Then if you want, go through the other ones. Mostly black budget stuff and fund diverging plans that have to be kept someplace where the GAO can't find them."

"Boss?" I spoke very quietly.

"Not now, Ted," Bellamy answered.

"I was just going to tell you thank..."

"Ted, get to work. I'll see you in two weeks." The line went dead.

"Okay, you two goons. I'm not here for the Sunday afternoon social with the Women's Auxiliary Of The Benevolent Society for the Protection of Unwed Mothers. Call me if you need anything. And what is this shit about you fucking a birthday clown? You have any idea what the paperwork is like on that? BWWM-HAHAHA!" Harv guffawed and hung up.

Jack sat back and looked at me for a long minute. "You sure you wanted to do that?"

"What?" I asked as I pulled the first file out of cabinet three, not making much of it all.

"What. . . the man ...asked me? Jesus, Ted! You have no idea what you just did, do you? You forced those guys into a life and death decision.

If there was any possibility that I was unfit, we would both be dead men!" Jack rubbed his hand through his hair.

"In case you hadn't noticed, we are anyway," I laughed out loud. "Besides, you have what it takes to be part of this. You've been an errand boy long enough. What?" He was looking at me again, beseechingly, for an answer.

"I hold a Master's degree in aeronautical engineering from USC. I am a career soldier. You guys all hold one or two doctorates in hard science. I don't know this stuff about phase shifts and feedback circuits. Hell, I can do calculus but you guys are writing things on white boards that nobody understands," he seemed overwhelmed.

"It's not about the science, Jack. I can hire scientists by the truckload. It's about this stuff," I pointed at the cabinets. "This isn't physics. It's war! Overt and covert war. So don't kid yourself! You're trained to handle this part of it, probably better than anybody. The Device, hell, we got folks that can build it, but this game is about brinksmanship of the first order and how to stand toe to toe with the neighborhood bully from someplace beyond the stars. You don't need to be a scientist to do that, but you got to have the toughness and the guts to stand your ground no matter how bad it gets. And right now, I promise you, it is going to get bad!"

Jack just shook his head, looking worried.

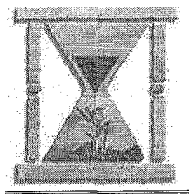
"And, we both went to USC, so us Trojans have to stick together.

What's our school motto?"

"Fight on!" He said proudly.

"And that, my friend, is exactly what we are going to do!"

He nodded and smiled, then opened a file and started to read.



CHAPTER 11

I read file after file until my eyes burned and my head ached. I'd stopped taking notes and even the ones I had taken were pointless since there was no way in God's great black universe I was going to be able to synthesize all of this information into any useable format that I could think of. The stuff just went on and on.

I turned to Jack pulling off my glasses. "Do you know about some project called GRUDGE?"

"No. Project Blue Book had something, but I read about it, like..." he looked at his watch, "four hours ago."

"A sixteen volume set documenting all the information, collected from the beginning of contact with the Visitors. All of our understanding about their science, technology, medical and intelligence information ... " I paused for a moment. "Who the hell collected this stuff?"

"CIA, NSA, or someone else, I would presume." Jack looked at his pad where he'd been jotting down notes as well, flipped some pages and found his reference. "Turned them all over to the, ah, Jason Scholars for review and evaluation and then put everything under Project: Grudge, I would imagine."

"I thought the Jason Scholars were futurists trying to road map what we should do as a nation to get there. Hm ... " I looked at another file. " Here: 'The Majority Agency for Joint Intelligence'?"

"MAJI." Jack nodded. " Yeah, they work for us. I know that one," Jack rubbed his face and got up to walk around the room. "We are never going to get through this stuff tonight."

"I know that, but hold on, I just found...." I trailed off and read down a report. "Read this Jack."

I handed it to him and without complaint he read the document, then closed it and read the file cover. Opening it back up, he sat and continued to read. I walked over to the intercom.

"Yes sir, what do you need?" The voice was not Rafferty's.

"How about some sandwiches and a six pack of beer?" I waited for the normal gripe about security, blah, blah, blah.

"Anything else Dr. Humphrey?" The voice sounded very young, eager to please and I couldn't tell if it was male or female. I looked over at Jack and we made surprised faces at one another.

"That will do for now. Oh yeah, where is the head around here?" I realized it had been a long time since I'd seen the inside of a men's room.

"Out the glass door, turn right, then right again. Heavy wooden door, sir." The intercom went dead.

"Back in a flash," I walked out and found the restroom around the corner. As I washed my hands I splashed water on my tired unshaven face running my hands down the stubble on my chin. I looked up into the mirror to check my bloodshot eyes.

A woman was standing behind me.

I whirled around and she was gone! I turned back to the mirror. .. nothing...then, panicking, I kicked open all the stall doors, as if she could hide by moving that fast, and the absurd thought actually rushed across my fevered brain for a second that she had somehow jumped into a stall and made her escape by flushing herself down the toilet.

All Empty. I was alone in here...but I hadn't been seconds before. She had dirty blonde hair and I'd seen her face somewhere before! I shook it off as a hallucination induced by stress, coffee, cigarettes, and having the little spiders of this much top-secret information crawling around in my head all at once. I soaked my entire head in cold water, dried off and headed back to the file room.

"You okay?" Jack noticed my worried face was ashen white.

"I just saw a reflection in the mirror behind me," Jack tensed and reached for his .45 Colt, long ago learning to take anything I said or had seen as gospel truth.

"Don't bother. There was no one there when I turned around. But I've seen her face before, I'm sure of it. I just can't place it," I sat back down, utterly bewildered.

"You need to take a break and get out of here?" Jack still held onto his weapon.

"No, and I don't think I am cracking up, but one never knows," I sat down, closed my eyes and rubbed my face.

"How is it we know so much about them but don't seem to know anything at all? It just doesn't add up. These files represent tens of thousands of man hours but no one seems to know anything for certain." I noticed sandwiches and beer had arrived and I immediately popped one open and started to drink.

"This is a complete alien autopsy report. Everything right down to the composition of the stuff they use for blood. But...this can't be right. .." he

looked puzzled, "their brain vault capacity is less than a great ape." Jack closed the file and reached over taking a sandwich.

"Collective intellect? Hive mentality? That's what Boss One told me once."

I swigged at my beer still mulling over what I had seen. I was really tired of ghosts and magic janitors and mystery women appearing out of toilets in ultra-high security facilities. I swished the beer back and forth around in my mouth and an idea sprang into my head. "Does this place have any way of monitoring floor pressure?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Ask if there was a fluctuation in the floor density in the last ten minutes." I wondered if beings that were traveling through space/time, or ghosts, left evidence behind.

"The lady in the mirror?" Jack was up and on the intercom. Two minutes passed and someone called on the private line. Jack picked it up. "Yes, I understand... thank you.... no... that won't be necessary," Jack hung up and sat grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"Well?" I waited, hoping I was right.

"Six minutes ago there was a temporary fluctuation of six ounces in the approximate location of the stalls in the men's room." Jack screwed his eyes up into a squint. "Six ounces of what?"

"Sonofabitch, Jack! They leave a footprint! They have to assume a physical form and they leave a footprint." I got up and pulled on my jacket.

"What's going on now, Ted?" Jack followed me.

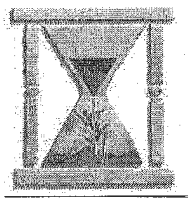
"They put this crap back, right?" He nodded in the affirmative. "Good. I need to get back to the lab for a while. We might just know something that everyone else doesn't." I dashed to the door and Jack grabbed another sandwich and hurried up to follow me.

"Are you going to tell me?" He asked as we were checking out of the security facility.

"Sure I am." I walked ahead in silence toward the elevator. "But not here."

Once we're on the surface level I turned back to Jack. "I want the records of everyone that has gone in there." I pointed down toward the room we had just come from. "Also, I want all the pressure readings from the same period of time." Jack thought for a moment and then nodded. He was processing the statement carefully and then the lights went on.

"Got it!" We walked back to the entrance heading for our parked car.



CHAPTER 12

When we returned to our offices, a man was standing at reception, holding a briefcase. He was in uniform and just seemed to be waiting. He acknowledged us upon entering and waited to be ushered into Jack's office. Harv hadn't lied; the new personnel documents were here for the new Boss in the system.

I went back to my office, followed by Shirley who had her note pad with her. She closed the door so we had privacy. I looked up and waited for her to tell me the endless list of people that wanted to talk to me.

"The man in the Cayman's called," she hesitated for a moment. "He says if you want, he'll have someone inside the beltway take care of the paperwork for England, whatever that means." She waited again for my response.

Ever the controlling figure, Bellamy didn't want to have me interrupted by such trivial matters as a messy divorce. I flushed and felt the blood rush to my face. The man was cold, but effective. That probably just comes with the turf.

"Good, call him back and tell him that would be helpful," I acted like I was in a hurry to start reading a file.

"I never talk to him. Just some guy that works for him, but I will make the call, Boss." Shirley walked out without another word.

I sat thinking that even our private lives weren't private at all. Every call, and probably every heartbeat, was monitored by someone.

* * * * *

It'd taken about four hours of hounding the folks over at Five-One to get the records I needed, but Jack was like a rabid bulldog, when you gave him an assignment. At 8 PM he walked in and dropped them on my desk.

"Why don't you head out and get some rest," I asked him.

"No. Now that we're yoked like oxen to the slaughter, I need to take care of more stuff before this night is over." He laughed and went back to his office.

I started to work my way through the list, comparing occurrences of additional pressure to times when someone was in the vault. No names were used, only numbers that didn't seem to correspond to anything logical. A pattern appeared in the randomness of the numbers. Then, very carefully, I noted the pressure changes lasting longer, when one number was in the vault. Graphing it on paper I noticed another pattern. It represented the same day and time sequences over and over again. Someone was going into the vault on the same day of the week, at the same time, and spending between two and three hours.

"Jack," I whispered into the intercom.

"Yeah?"

"Do we keep our records over there as well?" I wasn't sure of what I was asking, but had a feeling I was dangerously close to something. Jack paused for a long second or two then I heard him walking up the hall and he came in and closed the door.

"That's where we keep everything that involves us," Jack had a disturbed look. I motioned for him to sit as I looked at my watch, then made up my mind.

I hit the blue button on my phone and waited for the satellite connection. The phone rang at the other end. It was late, but I was sure the man I was calling would be there.

"Go ahead," the voice answered with the sound of someone puffing a pipe.

"67-09-66." I waited. The phone went from speaker to handset.

"Yes?"

"If I were to tell you we were not alone in the Vault, what would be your response?" Again the seconds passed, like grains of sand through an hourglass.

"My logical response would be that it was impossible. My gut tells me you know something I don't." I listened to the Zippo lighter being thumbed again and the sucking sound of him lighting his pipe.

"Every time. A pressure sensor indicates there was a fluctuation of six ounces corresponding to an event that seemed temporal to me, today, but in all actuality was more likely a mistake. Someone thought '67' was in there and they tried to make contact." I felt like I was writing something for Night Gallery.

"How deep is the involvement, or can you not speculate on that?" The voice was flat.

"If they accessed our files? I would say total knowledge is possible." If I was right this would probably mean a death sentence for someone.

"Is Jack in the room?"

"I'm here," Jack leaned into the speaker.

"Comments?"

"Ted's done the numbers. I'm looking at his graph and it shows other fluctuations other than the ones he's reporting," Jack replaced the documents back in front of me.

"Seal the base. I need to see this for myself. Sao Paolo will hold the baby right now." A momentary pause while the phone went back on speaker at his end.

"Jack..." I looked up at my partner and he was out of the room heading for a phone to seal the whole base down, from the front gate to our area. The folks that were still on base would just love this. Nobody gets on or off, so folks would have to use the dormitories and eat in the cafeterias until someone called off the alert.

"Harv, you there?" At the other end of the line, Bellamy became animated.

"Do you know what time it is here?" Harv was waking up.

"Get your fat sorry ass out of bed and head for Five-One. Ted found our ghost and the medium."

"Oh great! Middle of the damn night, lover boy is up working?" Harv grumbled.

"As well as being on the line. Say hello Ted," Bellamy laughed.

"Hello, Ted." I said smiling.

"Great! Now I got the kid listening in on my bedroom conversations? Does anybody know how to transfer out of this chicken shit outfit?" Harv was trying to smooth the wrinkles out from engaging his mouth before his brain was in gear.

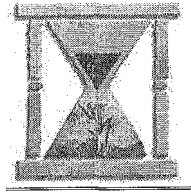
"I'll be there in less than five hours. You two grab some shut-eye. It will be a long damn day. Hold on ..." Bellamy was talking to someone else on another line. "Sao Paolo has taken over primary operations. I am moving now." The line went dead, just as Jack stepped back into the room.

"A man that doesn't believe in formality at all," I clicked the unit off on my desk.

"It's Wednesday night. They got a test flight going on over at Five-One. They want to know if they should abort." Jack was reading his notes. "Let them finish. Just quarantine the place until Boss One lifts it." I sat back and wondered why he wasn't surprised. "Jack, did you know we had a leak?"

"I didn't know, but there've been comments in the past. It seems like certain folks knew a little more than they should." He walked back to his office and his phone.

I spoke to the empty room: "Very interesting. That is all I can say about that."



Chapter 13

I was in the middle of a wonderful dream, lying on a beach in Jamaica, doing nothing. Seemed like that'd be a criminal offense to the people I worked with. The dream was really starting to get good, when a hand shoved me awake.

"Ted!" Jack was standing looking totally professional as usual in a clean dress shirt, tie and polished shoes. "We got visitors."

"What the hell time is it?" I swung up into a sitting position on the couch in my office and stifled a yawn.

"0900. Clean stuff for you."

Folded neatly at the end of my desk was a clean shirt, tie and shave kit, which I truly appreciated. Getting up I looked at my watch.

"How much time?" I picked up the things and headed for the men's locker room.

"Thirty minutes. They just touched down at Five-One," Jack hesitated and then added, "I hope you're wrong, but I don't think so." He walked back to his office.

I got ready and was just walking back when I heard Harv's voice booming down the hallway. "So we got this new flight attendant on the Big Bird. A cute little Air Force corporal, who hasn't been farther east than Kansas and she sees me and what's-his-name get on and strap in. Well, she thinks they're going to go pick up fifty nabobs in DC and can't quite wrap her mind around a 747, being used for only two guys. I mean she's just cute as a button. She's mumbling about taxpayer dollars and what a waste, yada, yada, when Bellamy finally has enough and tells the pilot to dump her ass at the first available strip on the way out here. Jesus, Mary and Joseph! The skipper is planning to get into it with Bellamy when I have to intervene and tell this guy which way the cow ate the cabbage. This was the back up flight crew, 'cuz the first string were all laid up with the flu or something. Well, this full bird colonel is not exactly liking the treatment he and his crew are getting from the two civvies and starts to cite section and verse. Boom! Bellamy goes off and calls the goon squad in the back of the airplane up and suddenly this guy's eyes are rolling in up his head when he sees these four SAS boys come walking up,

reaching inside their coats. HA-HA! Poor dumb bastard! Probably dropped a load right in his pants when he realized he was transporting somebody's important cousin from Cleveland. Then Horton, that big limey dick that's like glue with Bellamy, pokes a huge .44 Mag in the pilot's face and tells him, what and why for....! Kee-RIST! You shoulda been there Thompson! You'd still be laughing your ass off. This guy hurries the flight attendant up to the flight deck and locks the door. I had to get my own damn drinks for the rest of the flight." Harv was crying he'd been laughing so hard.

"Where's Bellamy?" I asked, not as amused, as I walked in.

"In your office with the door closed. Said he had to talk to someone." Harv looked at me for a minute and for some unknown reason, except to himself he gave me a bear hug. "Sorry as hell about Ellen, kiddo. It's just the way the world works some times."

"Thanks, Harv." I felt embarrassed and wanted to move on to another subject.

"Conference Room Two is set up for us and I found someone to run over and get us some pastries for breakfast. Plus a gallon of hot coffee." Jack intervened with his usual quickness and class. We walked down and made ourselves comfortable. I realized I hadn't eaten anything since lunch the day before, while watching the F-117 go through its warm ups.

Bellamy walked in holding my graph and printouts from the vault. He poured a cup of coffee and sat, tossing the papers in front of him.

"Six ounces isn't much to hang someone on, is it Ted?" Bellamy looked like he'd just walked out of a normal business meeting. As usual there was no preamble to this session or his comments. It was straight for the jugular.

"It is, if it represents a signature." I didn't want to show my hole card just yet. I still wasn't sure which side of the table Bellamy was playing for right now. But I wanted him on the house's side for sure.

"Talk to me about signatures." He picked up the printout and scanned it.

"I was in the men's room at the Vault. In the mirror I saw a face, a blonde woman looking at me," I waited for just a second and then went on. "She looked like she'd made a mistake. I asked Jack to check the pressure sensors at that location and there it is," I pointed to the first printout.

"Are we talking visions now? We've somehow moved over to psychic spying like those weirdoes at the Pentagon, who had to go to even bigger weirdos at Stanford, to use that junk they call...." Harv had to think, "Remote Viewing! That's what they call it. Mumbo Jumbo, swinging a pendulum over a map and finding some lost schoolgirl from Montana? Hippies!"

"Close Harv, but no cigar," I looked back to Bellamy.

"Then what?" Bellamy was still playing hard to read. His actions spoke of someone who could be judge, jury and executioner, if I was wrong.

"Bi-location." I dropped the ace to see if anyone wanted to play out the hand.

"Go on," Bellamy held a hand up stopping Harv from his inevitable diatribe.

"They move through or around time and space, I'm still not sure. But they show up and have a physical form, or at least it looks that way. But in reality, they're nothing more than a loose collection of atoms, held together close enough with surface tension, to give form and characteristics of being really there. But there is no substance, only a simple interference pattern, making them look real." I knew how crazy it sounded, but it didn't matter. I didn't see a ghost! It was a real, or a facsimile of, a real person.

"Where did this collection of atoms come from?" Bellamy was asking the questions like Joe Friday investigating a homicide; just the facts, Ina'am.

"Around us. In this room, there must be enough spare atoms to make up a good twenty interference patterns that would look like real people," I had read something in my dad's notebook that made me believe what I was saying was correct.

"Dr. Boris Tarusov of Moscow University was working a few years ago on a similar assumption," Bellamy said, finally sharing. "He called it 'living luminescence', showing how faint rays of light coming off a leaf could be photographed to show the original whole plant. We stole some of his research and then he fell out of favor with the guys running the show and disappeared. He found that a small amount of photons could construct a complete image. What you're telling me is that when adding atoms to photons, you get what seems real and that the construct can actually interact with the environment. Is that right?" Bellamy pulled out his pipe and lit it up. "And show a weight displacement of six ounces." He already had at least a guess of what I'd told him. "I've been struggling for a few years with a similar problem. I've been meeting with a Visitor that's like no one any of you know about," Bellamy waited for the effect of his statement to hit its mark.

"You didn't think I should know about this?" Harv looked down over his glasses at the man he'd spent years with.

"It was need to know. The place I meet him doesn't have floor sensors. So I always assumed that his comings and goings were some kind of physical manipulation of space, but now I am not so sure." Bellamy got up began writing several equations on the whiteboard. "If I

understand what you've said, and what the Russians were doing, it should look something like this," he finished and looked at it on the board. Every one of us worked through the equation to see if we could catch up with him.

"Then the vector function is a form of strange entanglement." Harv was first to see the relevance.

"In quantum physics, yes. But in relativity it still violates the function rule," Bellamy chewed on the end of the marker and sat back down.

"Nothing can travel faster than the speed of light. But then what's the time frame the Visitor is working in?" Jack looked up from his notes.

"Tachyons? Superluminal loop hole in the whole theory?" I offered up, believing, but not being sure.

"Hypotheticals," Harv grumbled.

"How do they sense, then?" Bellamy ignored the comment.

"They use our field of vision, hearing, sight and touch." Again I was on thin ice for a scientist, all of us were.

"Oh great! And now boys and girls, let me bring in Mister Rodgers to explain the simple stuff. You're talking about ESP and telepathy with shit like that. Where's the hard science?" Harv was getting madder by the moment.

"Not necessarily. All sensory inputs are nerve impulses. If they can do a step-down transformer of some kind, they can monitor us, just like we tune a radio." Bellamy was already there, but the rest of us were still working on learning how to sharpen pointy rocks.

"That would require selective monitoring of at least five separate inputs on a nervous system that contains millions of inputs a second. Our best computers couldn't do that right now. Plus the voltage potential is so low it would take an immense amount of energy to do it! Where do they get that from?" There was no question Harv was a top-flight scientist, one of the best in the world, and when he wasn't cracking jokes he could think through a problem extremely quickly and find the faults.

"Us," Bellamy looked back up at the equation. "They're using us as the storage battery for their actions. Fifty-thousand volts of skin potential when we're aroused. Twenty-five to thirty when we're excited. Every time we meet one of the Visitors, I would imagine we're discharging vast amounts of energy, discharging it into the air around us."

"Static electricity?" Harv tossed his pencil down. "You're sitting there telling me they're using static electricity to re-refresh the interference pattern every second and then monitor our brain wave functions?"

"That's exactly what they're doing," Bellamy said calmly. "They are sitting somewhere in a darkened room, meditating, moving outside the normal flow of space and time. They show up, feed off of us and monitor our cortex. They see what we see and by doing that they can be watching

and learning from us all the time." Bellamy was there. Surprisingly, so was I.

"Then why have they only showed up when one person was in the Vault?" I asked out loud. "Why not monitor it when just anyone pulls out a file and reads it?"

"They would have to stand very close to someone and be inside their bio-plasmic field. An area that surrounds the body and pulsates with the energy we give off. When you turned around in the men's rooms it was so quick that the image moved outside your field and therefore disappeared. They need to be close to someone who won't notice them standing next to them at all." Bellamy seemed to know far more about this phenomenon than I was comfortable with.

"Your Visitor... does he or she, whatever it is; stand close to you?" I asked Bellamy.

"He and no," Bellamy tapped the inkless marker on the table. "But we built a special room for him to come to."

"What kind of room?" I remembered helping my dad build the laboratory behind the house in Barstow and something I thought was unusual at the time.

"A Faraday cage surrounds the room. We were told it was to keep interfering electromagnetic waves out," Bellamy actually smiled at his own naivety, admiring the cunning and artifice with which the wool had been pulled over his eyes.

"Instead, it keeps your energy pattern and the discharge in the room, building it up as you get excited," I offered up, realizing why we had covered the building with fine copper mesh wire in the desert, so many years ago.

"Stupid!" Bellamy hit himself in the head. "Just plain stupid to miss that one!" Bellamy threw the marker across the room losing his normal cool, which took us all aback. This was a man that could start a war, or have us all killed. He was not someone you wanted to see angry. But he was angry at himself now.

"What else aren't you telling us, Boss?" Harv said very quietly looking at his notes.

"A lot," Bellamy sighed and got up. "GOD DAMMIT! How could I be so fucking DUMB!! We've been waltzed right into this corner and we did it with our eyes wide open!! Goddamn it to fucking HELL!"

"Rafferty?" I said, looked up at the ceiling.

"We pulled him out of a research team when he started complaining about seeing things. Everyone thought he was just getting old and needed to be put out to pasture. I worked under him years ago and wanted to give him something to do to keep him from curling up and dying in some old folks home. I made him the custodian over at the Vault. He was always

backed up by the security people, but I never thought he'd spend his nights reading what we were working on. He couldn't let it go. So, he's been systematically reading everything we send there to be filed." Bellamy sat back down and for no apparent reason but his own internal dialog, smashed the coffee cup into a hundred pieces on the conference table with his hand.

"Damage assessment?" Jack asked in his normal voice, acting very professional.

"Oh, fuck, Jack! I don't know. Total, most likely! They're probably aware of everything we know and everything we're doing." Bellamy fumed like a man that had just lost his girl, his horse and the ranch on the flip of the last card.

"Well, we know one thing: we can stop this leak pretty damn quick, can't we?" Harv's face had grown dark with blood.

"No! Don't do anything like that." I heard the words come out of me, before I could even know what I was saying.

"What?" Jack looked at me incredulously. "The man has compromised us! God knows how long it will take to start in another direction and time is moving in on us very quickly."

"I know that. But this might be more of an advantage than you think," I got up and started to pace the floor, lost in my own internal dialog.

"Listen..." Harv stopped with a sharp wave of Bellamy's hand.

"Ted. Think out loud," he pointed at my head. "We need to hear what's going on in there. Pull us out of this somehow! Two-minute drill. Down by five. Go!"

"Okay...listen! We have two problems: first, find out who's penetrating the Vault. The woman I saw was not an alien. She was one of us. But more than that, she could be working for them. That's the first issue. I don't think we can find that out without using Rafferty. The second issue: telling them about the new project." I waited for a moment.

"What new project?" Harv looked more confused.

"Excalibur. The deep penetrating nuclear tipped drilling missiles we've developed to blow the holy hell out of the base at Dulce," I looked down the table at Bellamy.

"Reversal! Isn't that what you told me once, Ted?" Bellamy nodded at the idea.

"We're going to feed them false information out of our own files?" Jack caught the drift immediately.

"Not feed. Choke them on it. A weapon so strong that nothing can stand up to it," Bellamy understood and, rounding the last outside turn, was Harv, but he was catching up fast.

"Is that room monitored?" I asked Bellamy rhetorically. "No, of course not. You would not want someone who broke into the system, to catch a glimpse of a file cover or contents."

"That's right," Bellamy added.

"Pull Rafferty out. Install a whole new set of cameras and have them record everything, plus audio, twenty-four/seven," I looked at Bellamy who was regaining his composure as the plan of action seeped into his brain.

"Both issues. If it has substance we can record it." Bellamy looked over at Harv.

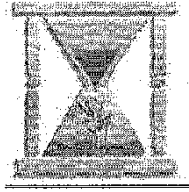
"Okay. I'll rotate him so he can learn about the new auditing system or some such happy horse crap. How long you need?" Harv asked.

"A week," I said to the group. "Then get him back in there. I believe this is our top priority right now."

"Make it so, gentlemen!" Bellamy slapped the table. "I need to get back to work." He got up, nodded to us and walked out of the room without another word.

"Moody. Has something to do with living in a hole in the ground, I'm sure of that." Harv got up and started to follow. He turned and looked back at me. "It's still better than being in Boulder City, playing with batteries, eh?"

"Good-Bye, Harv!" Jack and I said in harmony with each other.



CHAPTER 14

Two weeks passed as preparations were made for setting a trap for our unwanted guest. Operation: DOUBLE AGENT. Harv called every other clay to make sure we'd covered all possible avenues for monitoring the Vault. I added a little more to design specifications than anyone knew except for Jack, who was quite clear about his desire to remain mum about what I had done. I had soothed his concerns by telling him that if I was wrong about my little surprise, I didn't want him painted with the same brush as me. He reluctantly agreed, even though I knew if push came to shove he would admit foreknowledge of the trap. Jack was just that type of man, admirable beyond compare.

He walked into my office and sat down on a Thursday afternoon, before the day Rafferty was supposed to be back. I could already tell he was being pulled in many directions at once and wanted to air something out with me. I closed the folder I was working on and sat back in my chair. He had been an excellent choice to work with and over the period of time had become a friend in many ways. I believed he had a right to blow up, get mad or just pour his guts out about the whole enterprise without reprisal or sanction.

He sat there and lit up a cigarette. Blowing smoke toward the ceiling in my office he looked off onto some distant landscape.

"Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by this son of York," he said while staring off into space.

"Richard the Third. Planning to start a new career? 'Cause I'm seriously thinking about checking out the long haul truck driving school in Vegas."

"I sat up last night and read it again. I didn't get to bed until two and then I couldn't sleep. I kept tossing and turning, wondering who was playing Richard in our little drama," Jack crushed out his smoke in my ashtray.

"Good question. Any suggestions?" I'd been pondering the same question but in a far less elegant fashion using a mathematical spread sheet.

"I have several. None of them I like very much." He started to get up to leave.

"Sit down, Jack." I motioned to the chair and he complied. "Let it out. I need to bounce it off you as well. I don't like what I'm seeing any more than you do."

He sat and flicked an invisible piece of lint off his trousers in an effort

to buy himself a little more time. "If someone is monitoring us this closely, then wouldn't it seem logical that Tugy would have information that would put him in more control at Dulce? If Tugy doesn't know anything that we are doing, then who is getting the information? And if someone else has it, could it be the very group we're spending so much time and money on to prevent from wiping us all out?" Jack had been counting on his fingers.

I asked my burning question: "What if it's none of them?"

"Exactly!" Jack touched his nose. "Then who is it and why do they want to know what we're doing? If they are coming from the future, they should already have all of that information; it would be their history." Jack had taken the same quantum leap I had two days before.

"Do you read much quantum physics?" I wanted to know at what level I needed to start to hear myself talk and explain what I believed to be the truth.

"I'm acquainted, but I don't claim to know a great deal about it. Remember I am only an engineer, by education and a soldier by profession," Jack smiled to himself.

"Simply put, time travel has all kinds of booby traps. Some are the kind that won't allow certain actions to take place. You've heard of the 'Grandfather Paradox'?"

"Sure. I can't go back and kill my own grandfather, because then I wouldn't exist. The time frame won't allow it. If I am not born then I couldn't travel back in time," Jack might not have expressed it like a scientist, but hit it right on the mark.

"Exactly. But there is no paradox if someone jumps into the future and then brings back information into the past. It only accelerates the process of something already happening that is going to happen anyway. Since they're using something we invented here and now and then take it back with them into their present timeframe, they can use it, make it or create it. All that means is that on their timeline, the events happen differently. We are not affected because we are actually on a separate and distinct time line," I heard myself and started to realize I was probably correct about one thing.

"Okay, so how does that affect our Visitor in the Vault?" Jack wasn't there yet, but getting really close.

"They aren't monitoring us for someone else. They're using what we're doing to help them build their devices. In that way, they're making huge leaps ahead of everyone else," I couldn't believe what I was saying, but it fit the variables of the problem like perfect diagnosis for all the symptoms of a disease.

"So... the guy that visited you, was from our past?" Jack asked.

"Ah! From one of our possible pasts. He had to have gone ahead on the timeline and found the information in the work we're doing here, then took it back with him. When he shows up back in my office, he's jumping forward again and giving me what we would have already designed in our own future at some point. But then he looks like Mr. Wizard and we start thinking he's the mastermind of all masterminds. I know how crazy this all sounds, but it still fits onto the board as a good playable game piece."

"Then they are somewhere behind us on the timeline?" Jack rubbed his face and looked at the ceiling again.

"Or between intervals on the timeline. Choosing to stay in a sort of limbo. In that way they don't have to worry about being found, then or now. But we would have to lure them out somehow to get at them ..." This was the worst part of the theory that I could not hope to defend to Bellamy or Harv if I had written an equation to prove the point. We'd broken out the masks, rattles and grass skirts, because this wasn't science anymore; it was Voodoo.

The intercom buzzed and came alive with Shirley's voice. "Harv's on two for you Dr. Humphrey."

"Thanks Shirley." I sat there for a moment, laughing to myself again. "You know I think sometimes he has this room bugged as well," Jack said offhandedly.

"I put it on speaker. "Yes Harv?"

"Of course I do!" His gruff voice came clown. "Oh shit!" Jack said under his breath.

"Yes, of course I do, whaddaya think? Okay, get back to me!" Harv was yelling at someone else. "Sorry Ted, someone is having a cow about something they think is important over at the White House. Listen, tomorrow is going to be a strange day. Boss One and I will be at our respective spots monitoring from long distance, but are you guys ready at that end for this little fiasco?" Harv was slurping coffee.

"Yes, Jack and I were just going over the final plans."

"Final plans?" Harv huffed. "A camera and a set of high gain mics in a room doesn't sound like any major strategic formulation to me," Harv heard every word I said and wanted to know what they meant.

"Right. We are just very interested to see the results," I tried to cover my tracks on this one the best I could.

"Kiddo, I just hope, for your sake, you don't have any surprises for me and old what's-his-name," Harv sounded deadly cold on the other end of the phone.

"I just hope we get results," I looked at Jack who had his head buried in his hands.

"Good. I've sent the Excalibur Program file folder out by special courier. It's huge, about four hundred pages and twenty-five diagrams. Now here's the killer. We had the boys over at Brookhaven National Labs put it together on the fly. Bellamy told them it was a theoretical exercise needed post-haste. Gave them the parameters and they whipped out something that looks like the next gen of devices the Chinks are working on out of Loch Nor. Well, the funniest damn thing happened! Some dumb bastard over at the White House got wind of it and that fucking cowboy actor that thinks he's President hears about it and wants to start building a whole program around it! So while we speak they're starting something called the Strategic Space Weapons Program that he nick-named 'Star Wars', for Chrissakes! He somehow found out about it and now wants the damn thing built in less than a year. Can you believe that?" Harv didn't wait for an answer. "So if someone calls and asks if we are working on it, the answer is 'yes' and 'Hell, YES!' BWAAA- HA-HA!"

"Harv!" I yelled at the phone.

"Boss's orders. They want to weaponize space and we are here to help. That is the long and short of it. So all our money problems are over at least!" Harv laughed again.

"How did they find out about it?" Jack asked, without raising his head.

"What did he say?" Harv didn't hear the question.

"Who told them over at the White House about it?" I refined the question for Harv.

"Oh, hell, nobody knows. Somebody told their wife, who told the butcher at the market who told the news guy for WXXX TV in Chicago who called the White House to confirm the story and they said sure. That's the way things go in this town. Okay, I'll be on station tomorrow and we'll see what our new friend looks like." Harv clicked off.

"How far does the paranoia go?" Jack sat back and looked at me. "Did someone just happen to tell someone or did someone show up in the Situation Room in the Basement of the White House and tell someone we had a new invention. That someone being the person who is going to be in the Vault tomorrow and just happens to come back the day before to talk to someone else. This stuff could make you start drinking heavily, do you know that?"

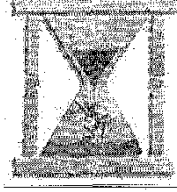
"That train left the station for most of us a while ago. And yes I do. So something that is invented by us and we know is not real, just used as bait

for a trap, becomes a real live weapons system, because now we have to build it to please our masters," I could feel the control of the situation slipping from my grasp.

"Did I do something to you that you are holding a grudge about? Is that why you Shanghaied me into this glee club of yours? As payback? I don't want your job, Ted. I was happy being a soldier in the service of my country. Now I'm dealing with you guys at a level I never wanted at all. What's worse, I think you're enjoying my pain." Jack got up to leave.

"You don't really want to know that do you?" I wasn't sure.

"No." He hesitated for a moment and then turned back to me. "Except the part about not wanting your job." He laughed and walked down the hallway.



CHAPTER 15

Jack and I had been sitting in the new monitoring facility we'd built for about an hour, watching the four different camera angles of the Vault. Not much had happened. We'd seen Rafferty twice, walk out of his office and head to the men's room and then back, wiping his hands and mumbling to himself.

The new hallway camera showed the elevator opening and a bright young officer in his blues walking out holding a file folder in his hand. The security guys went through their formal meeting and then one of them took the folder. He logged it in and stood behind their glass protection, until the officer left. At that point they opened the vault and one of them took the file into the room. Rafferty came out, took the clipboard, signed for it and then waited until the security officer went back to his post. He then entered the Vault, setting the file down and making the proper entries in his log and placing a self-adhesive label on the new file. It was jet black with a red line running diagonally across the cover. The highest level of security clearance was attached to it. This type of file was so far above Top Secret we doubted the President even knew this level of classification existed.

Rafferty sat down at the conference table and pulled a small black box from his coat pocket.

"Zoom in on that for Christ sakes." Harv's voice was in the room with us.

"It takes a moment, Harv," Jack said with a little more sarcasm than normal.

"What is it?" Harv was blubbering.

"It's a...communicator," Bellamy's voice sounded hollow and distant.

"A what?" Harv spoke again. We were in close up mode on one camera and looking at a unit with one button and a small red lamp.

Rafferty pushed it twice and then put it away.

"A communicator. I've seen one before," Bellamy answered.

"Who's he communicating with?" Harv couldn't just sit and wait.

"That's what we're going to find out. Pan that camera back out will ya, Jack," Bellamy answered again.

"Yes, sir," Jack was still military, whether he wore civilian clothes or not.

I sat there listening to the sound of the air-conditioning duct above my head in the small room off the hallway. The mics were so good in the Vault, we could hear Rafferty turning the pages of the report and looking at each one of them very carefully. I held my breath.

It started very slowly. A shimmering in one corner of the room, then it became more like a glint of something that moved in and out of the light.

"It's starting!" Harv ejaculated.

Then slowly a form began to appear, more like a retinal after image, like looking at the sun then looking away and closing your eyes, picture still burned onto your eye. Then, as more sparkling atoms came together, the form coalesced.

It was a young woman, with short, dirty blonde hair, dressed in dark slacks and a white blouse. The same woman I'd seen in the men's room.

"That's her, Boss!" I spoke to both Harv and Bellamy.

"I hope you have a tape running," Bellamy said dryly.

"Two, one backing up the other," Jack added.

"She is a looker, ain't she?" Harv had to add his leacherous comment, just to annoy us.

"If you like fake boobs," Bellamy retorted with an underlying hostility.

"Oh, those fun bags are the real McCoy!" Harv snorted. "You just don't. .."

"Hello, there. How are you, my dear?" Rafferty turned and watched where the phantom was forming.

"Good. And yourself. You haven't been here in a while." The form moved closer to the table and sat down next to him.

"Oh, I have been in training on our new system." He turned and smiled beguiling at her. "I wish you'd been with me, we could have had some fun in Houston. It's a lovely city." His voice was pure honey.

"I can't do that, you know that only too well. It's all right for me to come to your place now and then, but we couldn't be seen in public. What would your superiors say?" She spoke with a slight tinny metallic sound to her voice.

"Oh, them. All of their antics! My goodness they don't know the first thing about what they are doing. All this bother, you and I already know how to do it, you are the proof of that, both here and when you come to me at home." Rafferty made a gesture.

"She comes to him in full physical form?" Harv coughed into his hand. "That old bastard has been boning this broad! That's why he's giving her access to our files! He should be fucking hung!" Harv was never lacking opinions.

"By his nuts! But try to convince a jury he's having an affair with someone that doesn't live here anymore." Bellamy added.

"Listen, I have this new file I think our friend Simon would like to know about," Rafferty added nicely and then turned it to face her.

"Simon? Oh my fucking GOD! Simon Ratterman!" I actually yelled.

"Easy Ted," Bellamy's voice was right in my ear.

I slammed my hand down on the table. "ARRGH! I KNEW she looked familiar! That's Ann Corbett!! But that was over twenty-five years ago! I saw her in Barstow! She was posing as a waitress! She was the last person to talk to my dad!" I was raging at this point.

"Ted...?" Jack turned to me, looking concerned.

"I know, I know....!" I tried to calm myself down and get back on track.

"What is it about, Raffy?" She spoke in a low voice that still sounded mechanical somehow.

"A new defense system designed to blow up the little greys at Dulce, I would imagine. It has some flaws in it, but in principal it could be made to work, but not in its present configuration," Rafferty added.

"He figure it out that quick? By page four? Shit! I thought you put him out to pasture 'cause he wasn't the brightest bulb on the string?" Harv's voice echoed in the small room.

"We all make mistakes, don't we?" Bellamy wasn't amused at all. "Boss, can you get him out of there for one minute?" I asked the ceiling.

"Why Ted?" Bellamy answered.

"Trust me!" I wondered if this was the game blower or not.

"Calling. Stand by. Have Rafferty take this right now." We could hear him making the call and the security man answering at the vault. Rafferty answered the phone looking annoyed.

"Yes sir? Well right now is not a good time....is it in my office? Well. ... I understand. Well of course... Just a moment then, please. Let me put you on hold. Thank you." Rafferty pushed the hold button on the phone and then turned to his guest again. "I need to take this out there. It's trivial, so I shall only be a moment. Please wait." Anne Corbett nodded her consent and Rafferty walked out closing the door behind him.

"Te-e-d," Bellamy said, suspiciously, "what is the plan you two jokers have worked out?" Bellamy wasn't surprised at all, but then why should he be. He would have done the same if he'd thought of it.

"A reversal," I said. "We set up a Faraday cage that's being pulsed with static electricity."

"DO IT!" Bellamy yelled into the phone, "DO IT NOW!"

I hit the switch. The room glowed for a moment and there was a flare in the camera lens. We changed cameras and used the long distance ones across the room. These would be out of range of the static electricity and we could see the form in the room, swing around wildly, gyrating like a wound up top that had just been released. Jack had to turn down the volume control on the monitoring, since the screams were unearthly and nerve racking.

"Will it kill her?" Harv asked.

"No, but she's not going anywhere as long I have my finger on the button," I was actually enjoying the show. This bitch had taken away my father, wrecked my wife and destroyed most of my life. It was time for some payback.

"Pressure sensor shows mass at twenty eight, forty one, fifty two..." Jack was counting off the gain of structure and weight going on in the chamber.

The door flew open. "Stop it!" Rafferty was standing in the doorway yelling at the cameras. "Stop it!! You'll kill her! God Damn it! Stop it! You can't....you can't...!" He grabbed his chest over his heart.

"Let up Ted," Bellamy spoke above the noise.

"Why? Let's see if we can fry the bitch!" I growled, still holding the button.

"Doctor Humphrey. Release that button ... NOW!" Bellamy went formal.

I ignored him through the red haze my vision had become and the jackhammer pounding in my ears. DIE you evil CUNT! DIE!

Jack moved to lift my hand from the button and I hit him in the ribs with my elbow as hard as I could. I swung at him with my free hand and out of sheer luck I connected, clocking him right under the jaw. He stumbled back far more surprised than hurt, and I ground the button down with both hands as if more pressure would bring her more pain. Jack rose to his full height, puffed out his chest and cracked his neck to one side. He wrapped both arms around me and I fought him as he dragged me away. With one quick motion he spun me backwards and I slammed into the wall as he stood with his fists up between me and the big reel button. I had lost my mind and in a blind rage I tried to force my way past him! I couldn't let her escape! Not after all she had clone to me! Jack bent clown, put his shoulder into my gut and pinned me against the wall. I beat feebly on his back with my fists in ineffectual rage.

The screaming stopped as Ann Corbett shimmered out of existence to crawl back to whatever hell had spawned her. When she vanished, all the will and rage went out of me like air out of a balloon. Jack let me go and stood over me as I slid clown the wall into a heap, panting heavily. I realized tears were streaming down my face. I wanted to kill that little

whore! If it overloaded her circuits, wherever she was, that was all right by me. She deserved to die. For killing my dad, for Ellen, I would have fried her into the next galaxy over if I had my way. I shuddered, took a deep breath, turned toward the wall to steady myself, got up, walked down the hall into my office, slumped down in the chair and cradled my burning hot face in my hands.

Jack followed me in a few moments later still flush from the fight and jabbed his finger down at the phone. The hold light was flashing and it was ringing but I couldn't hear it through the red roaring in my ears. He turned and walked away closing my door behind him. I picked it up.

"Don't! Just...DON'T!"

"Ted, I would not even think of it," Bellamy said soothingly, knowing better than anyone on Earth what Ann Corbett had put me through. "It's just .. you made this personal. You forgot we need her in one piece when she gets back to wherever it is she's going."

"I know that. You're absolutely... correct. I was wrong, but somehow that just didn't matter right then ..." I said, gaining some semblance of my composure.

"Rafferty is dead. Massive heart attack. The static charge overloaded his pacemaker."

"Pacemaker?" I choked out the words.

"Yes. The static electricity in that room was enough to fry the circuits in it His heart probably exploded in his chest." Bellamy waited for the effect of his word to hit me,

"Oh my God! I am so sorry..." I truly was. I knew Rafferty represented a threat to all of us, but I didn't want to be the cme to throw the switch on him. But that is exactly what I had done.

"We both are. Now you have got to get past that and we need to find out what affect we had on her, where ever she is." Bellamy spoke very quietly into the phone.

"How do you propose we do that?" I asked, not really caring right now.

"I will make contact with someone who can find out." Bellamy was still quiet for a moment. "Have Jack secure the area and have forensics work it over." The line went dead. I walked out into the hallway and Jack stood looking at the floor.

"I'm sorry, Jack" I looked at him.

"So am I, Ted. So am I..." He lifted his head and his face showed a solemn sadness and a purpling bruise under his jaw.

"Secure the Vault and have the team process it for any evidence, please."
I turned to walk away.

"Ted," Jack stepped closer to me.

"Yes?"

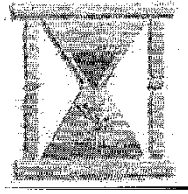
"It wasn't your fault. I don't know why it happened that way, but sometimes things just happen and we can't understand them."

I knew he was trying to make it all right for me and heal the wound that now existed between us. But I didn't care. I'd let my own desire for revenge cloud my judgment and it took him to stop me. I felt truly ashamed of myself. I walked away toward the lounge at the end of the hall.

I didn't want to talk to anyone anymore.

PART THREE

MISTER ATHINS



CHAPTER 16

I told Shirley I'd be gone for a while and probably wouldn't come in the next day either, then drifted out of the building like a ghost with no religion. She looked at me with care and worry in her eyes, but I didn't wait around for her to call Jack or anyone else. I got in my car and drove. I cleared the main gate at Groom Lake, or Five-One or Dreamland, or whatever the hell they were calling it now, and tore down the 17 mile dirt

Groom Lake Road, raising a huge sandstorm of gravel and dust in the air. A black helicopter swooped over me low, heading into the base. I ran the stop sign and squealed onto the pavement of Interstate Highway 375 in a careening controlled skid. I down shifted as the engine whined in protest, and tore up 375 headed north, with absolutely no plan to go home at all.

I needed solitude, and central Nevada was the place to find it. I

moved up the Tickaboo Valley, out beyond the trailer park shanty-town of Rachel, Pop. 18, and took 375 till it ended at a gas station in Warm Springs. I headed west, skirted around the Nellis Test Range, which is three times the size of Switzerland and takes up most of the middle of the state, and headed back down south on Highway 95, which bordered the west side of the range.

I crossed over the mountains on a two-lane blacktop that led down into Death Valley. On the edge of the desert, just along the foothills, is an old desert resort that was a high spot for movie stars back in the day. The Desert Inn was a well-designed desert building set amongst the gigantic boulders and desert plants. It had Arctic air conditioning, huge guest room suites, and a great restaurant and bar. I'd taken both Ellen and Irina thereback...when I was happy...and not a murderer.

I checked in with Tessa, a cute, young, perky local blonde, whose shirt was much too tight and whose breasts were much too big with a single button stretching the fabric and hanging on for dear life between them. I pulled my emergency travel bag out of the trunk I always had packed just for emergencies like base lock downs or complete and utter psychotic freak out breaks with reality. It was the height of their season, so Tessa did some finagling to get me the best room in the place for a government employee rate.

The room was ridiculously spacious, with two huge thick plate picture windows providing a panoramic view of the magnificent desert landscape. The heat was shimmering on the rolling white and gold sand dunes in the distance. I cranked the air-conditioner to maximum and lay down on the bed, just to enjoy the peace and quiet.

I wasn't aware of what happened, but between all the events of the last few days, I drifted into a dreamless sleep, where black nothingness surrounded my mind and I was embraced in the sweet arms of Morpheus.

I heard a ringing in the distance that grew closer, until finally I shook myself awake. I looked around, not remembering where I was, feeling startled. I couldn't imagine who was calling. No one knew I was here, that was the whole point of running away. So in a less than friendly voice I answered.

"WHAT?" I growled.

"Dr. Humphrey, is that you?" A polite, timid young woman's voice said. "This is, um, Tessa, at the front desk."

I immediately felt bad. Clearly she was just doing her job and I was ready to chew her head off. "Sorry, sorry... just woke up. Yes, Tessa, this is Dr. Humphrey, what can I do for you?"

"There's a message for you, sir, ah, doctor. ..sorry..." Her friendliness returned as she read the message back to me. "A... Mr. Atkins... was wondering if you would be so good as to join him for dinner in the dining room in about an hour?"

"Is he a guest?" I didn't recognize the name at all.

"No. He is apparently driving here to meet you?" She sounded unsure of the whole idea, but was probably used to strange meetings at this place, far from the prying eyes of others.

"Is there any information about who he represents or a call back number?" I was curious as to how someone could find me here so quickly.

"No, nothing at all. Would you like me to arrange a table by the window for six thirty?" She was being very nice.

"Sure, why not. Is the food good?" I joked with her.

"Best for a hundred miles in any direction." She tossed back. I liked that one.

"That's not hard to say, now is it?"

"I'll have your table waiting. Cotta go. Um, Bye!" She hung up. Clearly someone had walked up to the front desk that she didn't want to ignore.

I got up and decided to clean up. One never knows what a meeting like this is going to turn out to be like, so one should always put their best foot forward. I laughed and unpacked my case. My Walther PPK was snug in its holster. I pulled it out and checked the action. It might just

be the other item I would never leave home without, besides my American Express card.

* * * * *

"Tell me again! The part where no one knows where he is right now?" Bellamy and Harv were on the speaker with Jack who was sitting in the conference room. Bellamy sounded very cold on the phone.

"He checked out while I was over at Five-One having the place sealed and getting the forensic team doing collections. I got back and Shirley told me he'd gone home," Jack replied. "I know I should have been watching more closely, but I didn't think he would just leave."

"Did he take an escort?"

"No one." Jack could hear the wheels grinding away at the other end. "Do we have a marker on his car?" Bellamy hissed.

"We do, but all scans come up empty." Jack told them.

"How can that be? Those things can be picked out by any of the orbiting Keyhole Satellites," Harv interjected.

"Unless he's in some area of high metal concentration, iron ore or tungsten," Bellamy offered up. "Put a team on it, now. Don't spook him or approach if they find him, just monitor until I can get out there."

"You're going?" Harv asked.

"Yeah. He's going to need some answers and I am the one who needs to give them to him. He fried a guy this morning and I don't care what he might have thought about Rafferty, he was still a human being and Ted is going to feel responsible for it." Bellamy hesitated for a moment. "Jack, will you come with me when I get there?"

"Sure Boss, I'll be standing by to pick you up. I called out a search team to work in all directions." Jack looked at the map and wondered where Ted would be headed.

"If we are getting no signal he is hunkered down somewhere. Have Metrics pull all the places within two hundred miles that have heavy metal concentration and see if anything shows up. Just don't send those guys roving through the desert without a direction, or we'll have to put search teams out to find the search teams." Bellamy ordered.

"Besides frightening all the locals!" Harv laughed.

"So true. Find and watch is the order, Jack. Make it so." Bellamy clicked off.

* * * * *

The dining room was as nice as the rest of this palace in the desert. A large open room that was cool to the point of being almost cold. Several

couples were sifting in the room and waiters in black slacks and white shirts with ties, were hovering around to make sure all their desires were met. It seemed strange to be here and not really have any reason to be, as well as meeting a perfect stranger who knew more about me than I did about him.

The natural rock had been used for the outside walls and thermal glass panels provided the view of the desert in the distance without allowing the ultraviolet rays to get through and heat up the air. I took the chair by the window and ordered a cup of coffee and looked lazily at the menu. When I lived in Barstow I always wondered how they could sell fresh seafood in a town three hundred miles from the ocean. The same went for this establishment. But they had some exotic dishes I would have never expected to find in Death Valley.

"Dr. Humphrey? May I join you?"

I turned to see a tall thin man in a well-pressed expensive navy blue suit, thin blue tie and dark brown Fedora standing next to me. He could have stepped out of an MGM movie in the 1930s. His eyes were a deep, piercing, crystal blue and his skin a pale white and almost tissue thin.

"Mr. Atkins?" I stood up to greet him. He nodded silently and sat down crossing his legs and placing his hat on the empty chair revealing a thick shock of metallic silver hair. He meticulously unfolded his napkin, laid it gently on his lap and clasped his hands on the table.

"I hope you have not been waiting long?" Atkins spoke as the waiter moved over to loiter around us, taking drink orders and main selections, telling us how good the items we picked were. When my fresh coffee came, I added some milk and waited for him to start the conversation.

He looked very calm and then nodded towards the sand dunes.

"Did you know every year the desert encroaches on more and more land around the earth?" He sipped his tea and put the cup down quietly.

"I didn't know that. But then again it's not my area of expertise. Is this your field?" I thought about getting the game under way and this looked like the best opening gambit.

"No, but I am interested in the field of ecology on ...planetary levels. As with many species that have periods of existence within certain environmental niches, planets go through changing processes that can be charted and graphed. This world is no exception. During the last glaciation period, this entire area was one large inland sea. But now it is an inhospitable terrain fit only for small, well-adapted creatures and, of course, man. Humans have a strange way of surviving in very harsh areas, have you ever noticed that?" Atkins was stone faced. He had to be a good poker player, which was all I could determine so far.

Our main courses came and we ate in relative silence. The entree' was excellent and I truly enjoyed it with the view in the background. After the meal I found I was starting to relax and I was not sure why.

"I grew up out there, in a small town, on the other side of that." I motioned toward the desert.

"Yes. Barstow, if my memory serves correctly." Atkins barely moved a muscle as he said it, all the time he just watched my eyes.

"That's right. You have me at a disadvantage, sir. You know something about me, and I know nothing about you. That hardly seems ... well mannered." I found a slight flare of anger rising in me.

"I know your father. That is all." He smiled briefly.

"My father's been dead for almost thirty years. I think the phrase you are looking for is, that you 'knew' my father." I felt the flush hit my face as the blood rushed up to it.

"The report stated that he was... missing...yes? Was he ever confirmed dead?" Atkins folded his napkin and laid it on the side of the table.

"When someone isn't around for thirty years, you can normally figure they're dead, whether you have an official report or not." I was finding this a little hard to take right now. "Look, do you mind if we give up the waltzing around and get down to the reason you wanted to see me. It surely wasn't because you knew my dad, once."

"That is precisely why I wanted to see you. Because of your father. You see our relationship, his and mine, goes back a very long time. Here, this might help." He pulled a faded photograph out of his wallet and laid it down next to my hand. The picture was almost identical to the one I always carried in my wallet, the one Kammler had given me.

"I've seen one like this before," I picked it up and looked very carefully at it. Atkins didn't look much different in the photo than he did sitting across from me.

"That is because they were taken within minutes of each other. I took one with the three of them in it, Kammler, your father and Simon Ratterman. Then Ratterman took one, with me in it." Atkins looked out into the desert watching the sun descend over the Paramint Range in the distance.

"You were working with them in Germany? After the war?" I laid the picture down and slid it across the table. He picked it up and replaced it in his wallet.

"No, I wasn't working there. I was just...visiting... them." Atkins motioned to the waiter to bring over more coffee and hot water.

"Then exactly what part of the secret government do you work for, anyway?" The waiter refilled my cup and his teapot with hot water and moved away trying to be nonintrusive.

Atkins laughed slightly, "I am not one of those types. I am an historian of sorts. I conduct research on technology."

"That facility was closed up tighter than a hull's butt in fly season. If you don't work for the government, you would have never gained entry. So let's give up the charades and just tell me what you want. That picture will buy you about two more minutes of my time and, that's it! Don't waste it!"

"I would imagine that you would be the one wanting my time actually, Dr. Humphrey. I am the only one in the flesh who can tell you how to make the small orbiter craft in your hanger at Groom Lake work, without losing time." He dabbed his mouth after he had taken a drink of tea.

I couldn't believe what I had just heard. I cocked my head and leaned forward.

"Okay. You just bought yourself five more minutes."

"That gives me seven," he flashed a bizarre crooked smile. "All right, here it is: You are working on two items of vital interest to certain parties. The first is a device that will allow you to move through time, back and forth, and by doing so you believe you can mend and modify a rend in the local space/time matrix.

"Secondly: you are trying to find out how the craft works so you can reverse engineer one very much like it and use it for defense in a few years against a marauding band of planet killers that are supposed to descend upon your world when certain galactic alignments occur after December of 2012. Am I correct, so far?" He paused and looked back out at the sunset.

"You just got an extension on that clock," I sat back and wondered where this guy came from.

"Thank you. Who likes to rush? There is never enough ...TIME ...yes?" Atkins pulled a long white piece of paper out of his pocket and laid it on the table, pushing it towards me. "These are the formulas you will need to work out the faults in the device. With those equations you can have it up and operating in less than a month. Please make an extremely careful note of the handwriting."

I opened up the folded sheet and saw seven equations running down the center. Every one of them fit perfectly into the problems we were having. The designs left for me before by my other friend, Charlie the Magic Janitor, was the mechanical aspect. This was the program that would make it work like a Swiss watch. I had only completed the top one. Back at the lab it would require a whole series of trial and error experiments, thousands of man-hours and take years to get to the second one, if we ever stumbled on it at all. I folded the paper back up only to reopen it and look at the handwriting, as realization dawned.

"That's right, Ted. It was done by your father. He wanted you to have it after you got to a point where you could use it on the small device." Atkins smiled at me.

"When did he give this to you?" My head was whirling again and I had a thousand questions.

"Let me simply say that it was after his disappearance," Atkins was being cagey and I didn't like this part of his game.

I sat back and waited while some folks walked past the table and were speaking about the vista outside. The dining room by now was fairly empty and the wait staff were cleaning up and clearing off tables to prepare for the breakfast rush the next day.

"And the little craft? What about it?" I waited while he finished his tea.

"Ratterman gave your wife Irina a template to operate it. The only problem with it was that he gave her only a third of it. He was hoping you would be eager and reckless enough to try it and be scattered across the universe, hopelessly marooned in the infinity of space and for ever lost in time. You, wisely, resisted that impulse. So Dr. Ratterman underestimated you. I assure you he will not do so again. If you knew exactly how the scout craft worked, you could use the ship for many things that would directly affect his plans and those of the people he works with. So he tried to get you out of the picture. Piff!" He gestured with his hands like an explosion. "Ted Humphrey is gone and nobody is going to be able to fix the problem. In effect, by default, he wins the game."

"What game?" I was trying to follow him.

"Dear boy, the race that all of you are in to save this little world of yours. Simon Ratterman sold you all out years ago and went to the other side. He has been coming and going trying to muck about and cause problems. But there are many of us who love this world and would like to help more, but the rules of engagement and involvement are very strict and only certain things can be done." He looked across at me and then closed his eyes. "You are still dealing with this exclusively as a scientist and you haven't figured out that you need to move into a different realm of thinking. You need to start managing this problem as though the future depended on it, because, I assure you, it does. Your father was willing to make many sacrifices in this matter and he believed you would be of the same mettle as he was in this regard."

"Then by giving me this," I held up the paper, "you're not violating the rules?"

"No. We did not produce it, your father did. Ratterman gave you the template. If you can find the other part of it, then we have not violated the rules." Atkins gave a slight, but knowing smile.

And, of course, it also benefits you and yours if we get it right?" I added, playing a hunch.

"Of course. But be that as it may, the task at hand is going to take your undivided focus and concentration. You must not waiver. Today, you left the base with the idea of never going back. If you do that the projects there will be thrown into disarray and the time-line for completion will be set back years, at the very least, which is time you do not have. By that action alone, you guarantee your world will never be ready for the time horizon or event, and hence, you doom this entire evolving sector of the galaxy." Atkins was actually animated and intense for a moment.

"Ann Corbett?" I had to ask. "I tried to destroy her doppelganger today inside a static chamber."

"I know." He didn't act surprised at all. "You damaged her. It will take months of rehabilitation before she can make another time jump. Crude as your trap was, it caught her and Ratterman off guard. He is now angrier than I could ever have believed. He took her with him when he left years ago and has used her in many ways, so if the man is capable of loving anyone, which I doubt, he is probably smarting badly from having you beat him at his own game and bring her harm. But be warned, he is not a man to be trifled with and he does have means at his disposal. Just a word to the wise," Atkins raised his finger to the side of his nose in an all-knowing gesture. He then turned his head as if hearing some silent bell. "I must be on my way. Good luck to you, Dr. Humphrey." Atkins got up and buttoned his jacket.

"One more question before you leave, please?" I hoped he would linger just a moment longer. I felt the Walther PPK in the small of my back and considered using it to hold him here until I could get a team clown from the base.

"I will answer it, but first," he laid the clip to my gun on the table. Smiling he looked down at me. "I haven't lived this long among humans without understanding how their minds work."

"Sorry, old habits die hard," I apologized. "Your question?" He waited.

"Is my dad still out there somewhere? Alive?" I held my breath.

"Your father is not far away right now. Yes he is alive. But I cannot say more as it would deflect your progress. He wanted me to give you that. It should indicate something of his concern for this project." He paused and closed his eyes, listening to some inner guidance. "Your father, in his way, loves you very much and is proud of the man you have become. He promises he will make all this right someday and that your difficult path was necessary, in order to save us all."

Tears welled up in my eyes. "Thank you." I said to the strange visitor.

"I cannot linger. In one minute and twenty-seven seconds you are going to have some company. Good-bye Dr. Humphrey. Until we meet again."

He touched my shoulder and I felt a shock go through my body. I wanted to get up, but couldn't move. All I could do was watch in the mirrors at the distant end of the room his retreating form as he walked through the lobby and waved at the receptionist with the ample bosom.

As he opened the right door to exit the lobby, the left door opened and Bellamy came bursting through with his security team in tow. When the paralysis finally wore off I staggered to my feet and toddled towards Bellamy like a two-year old, waving my arms in desperation, but I couldn't get my speech centers working. Bellamy turned my way and ran up to me and I fell into him hugging his neck to break my fall.

"S-s-s-stop the man ... passed ... you!" I stuttered in a cracking voice. He sat me back down in a chair, concerned.

"Do you need a doctor?"

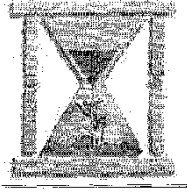
"N-n-no! Stop... silver ... man just passed in ... lobby..." I felt a sharp pain in my arm.

"I didn't pass anyone. I have two guys out there who told me nobody had been through there in twenty minutes. That you were sitting here alone." Bellamy sat down in the chair just occupied by Atkins. He picked up the clip for the Walther and looked at it. "We got a problem here or what?"

"No, thas mmmmine...." I said slowly getting my tongue to work again. "But to tell you how it got thar, youuu jussss wonnnn' buluurve me...." I took it and dropped it into my coat pocket.

"Try me," Bellamy barked as he called a waiter over and stuff a \$100 bill in his breast pocket and the man went to brew as much fresh coffee as we could swill.

Bellamy steepled his fingers and sat back. "I am all kinds of interested to hear anything you got to say."



CHAPTER 17

It was midnight by the time we finished discussing my meeting with Atkins. Bellamy listened while I related every detail in depth and my assumptions about what it all meant. The waiter had left, telling one of Bellamy's aides where to find the fresh coffee and where to put the dirty dishes when we were done. He had to be back for breakfast and didn't want to spend all night sitting there. Another \$100 bill from GB recovered his normal helpful attitude and probably a word or two from one of the Boss's men, encouraged him to forget ever seeing any of us.

After Bellamy finished reading the paper I handed him, he slid it back to me and lit his pipe. "I've tom apart four states looking for you, you know that?"

"Oh, come on! Seriously?" I exclaimed in shock and disgust. "I've been gone, what? Ten hours? What's the big deal, dad? Can you climb out of my ass just long enough for me to clear my head? Christ! I just murdered an old man! I needed some ...time."

"Say that to me again, very slowly." Bellamy looked at his watch.

"I left the base at exactly 1100 and it is now midnight. 13 hours. What is the big deal? I would've been back by tomorrow noon," I sat there waiting for an answer that didn't seem like it was coming.

"Ted. You completely vanished off our radar for three days," Bellamy blew smoke toward the ceiling. Thinking about what I had just said and pondering the consequences. "It took us two and half days just to find your car. The registry at the front desk says you checked in Monday about 1600. It is now," he checked his watch and spoke very slowly, "Zero Dark
15... Thursday morning."

I was flabbergasted. "That...that--can't be! Call the front desk girl, ah, Tessa! She'll tell you I checked in today. She had to juggle rooms to get me one," I was pushed back a step or two by his reaction.

"I did. Tessa," he cupped his hands in front of his chest, "told me you've been in your room and calling down for room service. Tonight's the first time you came out of your hole and had dinner ...alone." He raised his hands in a gesture of not understanding.

"I don't get it. I just don't. ..." I was confused again but now starting to panic. Missing time? Alternate time lines outside reality? Time movement inside another time movement? Invisible Space Men? I needed answers no one here was going to give me.

"Let's head back to your place and spend the night there. Then, tomorrow we'll all sit down and try to make sense out of it," Bellamy got up and motioned for his men to head out and get the cars ready.

"Am I under house arrest or something?" I was suddenly frightened of Bellamy and now terrified that they would order Jack Thompson to shoot me in the back of the head. I stood up and stumbled backwards in unreasoning fear. "Are you gonna have me killed now?"

"TED!" Bellamy shouted, snapping me out of it. "No. I just don't want to stay out here, so far from back up. It's my own paranoia than anything about you. Come on, my friend, let's you and I sit in the back seat and talk while one of these overpaid thugs drives us back over the mountains." He nodded to the large blonde man in front of us, who opened the front door. "I need to hear what your new friend told you before you sleep on it and forget all about it again." He laughed. "We have a strange way of doing that don't we?"

I was not quite sure of what he meant, but it was clear to me that he had some experiences similar to mine and had lost the main thrust of his meetings after sleep. But I still wasn't sure if he just wanted to know everything I knew before he made me dead.

* * * * *

We had spent the morning going over the incident in the conference room. Harv was on speakerphone and Jack was sitting with us taking notes. By noon I was trashed and needed some shut-eye. My whole circadian rhythm was off and I was running behind the curve a little too far to be of help to anyone right now. I had somehow been forcibly yanked out of the time stream, dragged along the shore, then shoved back in the river. I felt like every atom of my body was vibrating out of phase.

Over the past few months I had the fabrication guys build me a half dozen plastic templates like the one Irina had given me on that fateful day at Betty's Diner, which seemed like a hundred years ago.

I picked up one of the green replicas off my desk as I laid down on the couch, held it up to the ceiling lights and examined it carefully. I thought about how it worked in the craft and then smiled to myself. Maybe it was being out of phase with reality that helped me see something right then that made total sense that I should have seen before. Hitting the couch in my office I dropped off into a deep sleep, and let my body relax for the first time in a long while.

I awoke at 0500 to find someone had thrown a blanket over me and taken off my shoes. The couch in my office was being used more often than the king-sized bed at my house across the valley Ellen and I once shared. This wing of the building was silent with the exception of the air- conditioner sounds coming from the vents. I watched the gaily-colored dust strip on the blower weakly oscillate like a bad tired party as the flow of air moved past it. That was part of one of the answers I needed. The second one I would test later in the day.

Walking in my stocking feet I padded down to the reception area. A security officer was always on duty when Shirley was gone. The young man was sitting reading a sports magazine.

"Good morning," I said as I silently walked up to him and the young guy nearly jumped out of his shoes getting up and dropping the magazine on the desk.

"Sir! Good morning. I was..." he started and I waved for him to relax.

"Is Dr. Bellamy still here?"

"Let's see," he looked at the check-in clipboard on the desk. "No sir, he is still on site at the transit dorms. Do you want me to call him?"

"No, just leave a message that I'd like to see him after breakfast," I started to walk away and then turned back to him. "How are the Los Angeles Rams doing?"

"They'll never make the playoffs," he said with a smile.

"Too bad," I went back to my office to clean up and get ready for what was going to be another interesting day.

By 0900 I'd finished my work in the Fab-Lab. Fabrication techs were strolling in and upon seeing me working on the plastic cutter, started to act like they had a lot of important business to do. An older man, who was bald, with a reddish face, walked up next to me and watched as I attempted to use the cutter.

"Can I help you with that, Doc?" He looked over at me. He seemed like one of those good natured sort of fellows that could do what I was trying to accomplish in a quarter of the time, but didn't want to show up the amateur if I was bound and determined to display my ignorance of his system.

"Sure can. Not as easy as I thought," I handed him the template and my crude drawing. He looked at the unit I was cutting and pulled out another blank of green plastic.

"It's all in the setup of the cutter. You're running it a little too close to the line you want. It can even fillet the holes if you add a little more cutting speed. Here, let me show you." He replaced me at the machine and in less than ten minutes had produced the exact image on the plastic that I wanted. I laughed to myself. It had taken me an hour and half to roughly cut my form and, again, I realized I should stick to my whiteboard

and let the real experts do their jobs. Thinking about this, I realized my father had to be a man of many skills to have accomplished all he did working alone.

Thanking him, I took the new template and went back to my office. The complex was coming alive with folks in white smocks carrying clipboards moving around the various lab areas I was responsible for. One of these days I think I need to find out what all of them really do here. As I walked past, Shirley was already at her desk. I said good morning, and she got up and stopped me. She folded her arms and the scolding began.

"Boss, it may not be my place to say anything, but this stunt of yours just scared the Be-Jesus out of both me and Jack!" It was the way she said his name that gave me the first indication that theirs had turned into something more than a working relationship. "Well, anyway, listen, you need anything these guys here aren't supplying, you let me know. I just don't want you taking off and leaving us all trying to figure out if you're pulling a Jimmy Hoffa on us, okay?" She smiled at me.

"Anything?" I teased.

"You got it. Hey! You need a hooker, I will go over to the Cotton Tail Bunny Ranch in Pahrump, get the best one I can find, and smuggle her onto the base in the trunk of my car. You want the band from the Sands Hotel lounge, I will steal a truck and get them here. I really don't care! Just let us know if there is anything we can do," she blushed slightly, realizing she might have said more than she should have, and showed she might care a bit too much.

"Thank you, Shirley. I don't think we'll have any more problems." I walked past Jack's doors where he was acting like he was engrossed in some paperwork. I was well aware, at this moment, he didn't want to look up after hearing what had just transpired in the hallway. It's strange how people react during periods of complex excitement. I thought about it and considered the strangeness of that relationship. I hoped Jack had a better track record with women than I did.

I walked into my office and the blanket was put away, everything tidied up and someone had used an air fresher to remove the smell of sweaty sleeping man. My high-backed leather chair suddenly swiveled around revealing George Bellamy holding a file.

"Good morning, Mister Bond!"

"Do you want me to talk, George-finger?" I smiled.

"No, Mister Bond, I want you to die!" The standard response almost all men.

"I know where I can get you a white cat," I joked, playing along. "Not Persian though. Norwegian."

Bellamy closed the file and tossed it on the desk smirking a rare half smile, puckering the purplish folds of his scar. The smile slowly drained from his face and he took a deep breath.

"I just got the latest report from Dulce. In the last forty-eight hours activities have increased. They've sealed off Green-Level-Four, again, but from the inside this time. The Hive won't talk to anyone. I think it's related to your visit with your new bestest pal," Bellamy handed me the chart and I looked quickly through it.

"Let's deal with this one in a little while, I think I have the answer to that problem as well," I handed back the clipboard and file and clapped my hands. "You got a little time for an experiment that involves real science?"

"Sure, I will make time, if you think it's important." Bellamy got up and left the file on my desk as we walked out into the hallway. "A.D. Thompson! Front and center." I yelled down the hall.

"Sir, yes sir!" I heard Jack pushing the chair back and jumping up.

"I love that!" I said smiling. "He still thinks when someone calls him by his last name he's going to get an ass chewing," I headed down the hall toward the double doors that led to the hanger bay when Jack joined us.

"What's up?" He asked. Bellamy shrugged his shoulders and pointed at me.

"When I was a kid, I used to watch Mr. Wizard on Sunday mornings. He was always doing something that was hard science but reducing it to a simple trick to show the kids with him how it applied to everyday life. After he showed them how a newspaper could hold enough pressure, when spread over a yardstick, he could break them in half with just a hit of his hand. I broke a half a dozen rulers learning how to do that one." We cleared security and then walked into the sterile bay and stood in front of the Sport Model scout craft.

"So we're going to break yardsticks all morning?" Bellamy added sarcastically.

"Not exactly, George. C'mon! Where's your sense of wonder gone? This will cheer you up, I guarantee. Open her up will you Jack," I watched as the hatch lifted into full open position.

"Inside my man. I thought we would have Jack lose a couple of days and have Shirley pull her hair out for another reason besides me, Boss," I winked at Bellamy who didn't seem to be in all that good a mood anymore, if he ever really was.

"Oh great. Payback time." Jack crawled into the pilot's seat and waited until it conformed to his body.

"I know how this part works," Bellamy deadpanned.

"Sure you do, but you don't know this one. Now boys and girls watch Mr. Wizard very carefully as he tests his latest amazing theory!" I turned

to Bellamy. "You know when Howard Hughes told the world that if the Spruce Goose didn't fly he'd leave the country. Same bet is on the table right now. I will become a carrot farmer in Idaho if this doesn't work."

"It's potatoes, so no chance of that. If this doesn't work my goons beat the arrogance out of you for good measure," Bellamy finally laughed a little.

"Good, deal." I used my Walter Cronkite announcer voice, "More exciting when life and limb are on the line here folks in greater downtown Groom Lake. Like working for the Russians with their two- button system: One to launch the missile and if it doesn't work, the second button blows up the engineer! True incentive for the poor schmucks working for you, Boss." "Better than Harv's one button system," Bellamy added with a sense of irony. "It just offs the designer before he can finish the project."

I produced the new dashboard template out of the white envelope in a corny flourish of prestidigitation. I handed it up to Jack in the craft who spun in his hands, inspecting it, while I wiggled my hands at him. Jack placed it on the console.

"Am I supposed to hit any of these unmarked squares?" His fingers were poised over the new configuration as the machine conformed to the new panel. I jumped up and pulled it off the console.

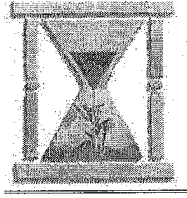
"Oh, hell no!" I handed the template to Bellamy. "Conforms to any shape you place on it. Multiple roles for the same craft. Ingenious as hell isn't it?" Bellamy handed it back to me and Jack crawled back out of the craft and dropped down.

"That son of a bitch Ratterman only gave us the parts causing time dilation. He wanted us to make a mistake and splatter our atoms all across the space/time continuum. Well, that MY atoms, specifically, would be splattered across the space/time continuum. He figured if that happened, we'd give up on trying to find out how these little beauties work. So, we need to start by having an analysis team tell us the finger length spread of the alien hand that flies this thing and how many buttons they could use at one time. We need to work out the configuration of the exact hole placement and then, and only then, can we start pushing buttons and take some easy steps in learning how to fly this thing properly," I turned and walked away.

"You just thought of this all on your lonesome...or did someone tell you these little facts?" Bellamy asked my retreating form heading toward the door.

"It came to me in a dream. Now let's look at our other problem, I think I may have the answer to that one as well." Bellamy started to follow me and turned to Jack as he was closing up the lid on the spacecraft.

"Get all of Mr. Wizard on VHS so the rest of us can catch up with our Boy Brainiac here," Bellamy jogged up to get next to me. "I love surprises, but Ted, this one is just too good."



CHAPTER 18

Jack had just walked into Conference Room 2 with Dr. Steven Loppin, MD, where Bellamy and I were on the phone with Harv. Loppin looked like a deer caught in the headlights of a fast moving car on a deserted stretch of road in Maine. He didn't even know Groom Lake existed with its black buildings and tons of jump suited security men, armed to the teeth. He'd been part of *PROJECT: HAYWIRE*, working exclusively on alien anatomy. He was classified as the best expert we had on their physiology, at least the ones that we knew about, as we had been able to get a body or two and a few live ones courtesy of the Thor's Hammer and *PROJECT: POUNCE*.

Jack had been running around all morning trying to cover all the requests that I was throwing at him and looked it. I had never seen him in anything but a pressed and ironed shirt and slacks that always looked military perfect. But today he was sporting a pair of Levis and a polo shirt. The only unusual things about him was that he also wore his .45 Colt on his hip and had a metal security enforcement badge on his belt, making him look like an off-duty cop. Dr. Loppin on the other hand was the perfect M.D. Wearing khaki slacks and a button down shirt with pens and thin flashlights in a neat row on his ink stained plastic pocket protector. Uncomfortable was all I could add to the description that would make sense of what he looked like.

"You do understand everything said or heard in this room is classified Above Top Secret, don't you, doctor?" Bellamy had put on his 'Voice of God' to make the right impression from the start of the meeting.

"I am cleared by the military to handle security matters. Yes, my work requires it," Loppin was trying to find parity quickly with the scarred faced man across from him.

"Listen to me very carefully. You have not seen any of us here today. You have never been to this facility. You will not remember anything we talk about here today. Is there any part of this you do not understand?" Bellamy wasn't allowing anything near parity to occur.

"Now look here, I am...." Loppin started.

"Dr. Loppin, this is Dr. Harvey Glipsen in DC on the speakerphone," Harv was right on top of it and worked the good cop, bad cop really well with Bellamy.

"Dr. Glipsen," Loppin answered.

"Steve, these men represent the highest level of our government. Don't ask any questions you might regret. Answer them fully and completely and there will be nothing else said about this," Harv was using the oldest trick in the book. He wanted Loppin on the defensive.

"About what? Oh no, never mind. I'm sorry. Yes, I understand that this is a private consultation where no records are to be kept. Fine. What can I do for you gentlemen?" Loppin regained his composure. Everyone in this business lived with paranoia in their back pocket. The stories ran rampant in these places about people disappearing and never being heard from again. Some of them talked about murders in the middle of the night and people being sent off to China for experiments. It made for a great working environment if you were anyplace down on the pecking order or food chain, whichever analogy worked best.

"Is it true that you performed an autopsy on a type two alien body one year ago in your facility at Five-One?" Bellamy looked at his notebook that consisted of a blank sheet of paper.

"A type two?" Loppin hesitated.

"A reptilian type of alien," Bellamy pushed harder with his voice.

"Yes. That is correct. It had been dead for probably seventy-two hours and had several lacerations and deep cuts on its body, which corresponded to a forcible landing in a hard craft." Loppin was precise, that was good.

"During that investigation did you determine the respiratory system of the alien?" Bellamy was now making notes.

"I did," Loppin however wasn't giving up anything that he wasn't asked. Probably out of sheer terror of saying the wrong thing.

"Describe the respiration method and chemical complex for its survival," Bellamy made sure his scar was pointed right at him.

"It's a gas breather, mixed levels most likely. It can maintain itself in our environment for one or two days, without marked reduction of ability, but they must have an input of methane at that time or they start to exhibit signs indicating respiratory suffocation. Fluids would start building up in their lungs and they would die in a matter of hours." Loppin waited and fidgeted while Bellamy looked straight at him.

"What kind of gas and air mixture would cause their system to collapse almost immediately?" I asked in a matter of fact voice.

"Freon, high amounts of hydrogen, any of the noble gases and most likely a compound like Carbide mixed with water. It would fry their lungs in seconds," Loppin offered up.

"Most likely or it would? I need certainty Doctor," Bellamy fired back.

"It would. Their tissue couldn't handle it. They'd go into arrest from the lack of gas flow because the lung couldn't function properly and they'd have no way of throwing it off. With each breath they'd be struggling more and more to breathe, gulping in more of a mixture that would cause their alveoli to rupture more and more rapidly. But it would have to be in a confined area and in a highly concentrated dosage." Loppin twisted in his chair in discomfort.

"And hydrogen?" Bellamy looked up from his 'notes'.

"Slower, but the same effect. Suffocation, but it would just take longer," Loppin tapped his finger on the table for a moment and looked up into space.

"What is it, Doctor?" I asked in a gentler voice.

"Florin!" He slapped his hand on the table. "It's toxic as hell in a confined area and they could stand it for..." he paused to make a mental calculation, "maybe twenty-five to thirty seconds. Also, it would blind them completely. Their eyes have a strange membrane over them that would erupt when exposed to Florin and expose the inner eye to all ambient light. It would appear that light is one of their greatest dangers from evolving either underground or a low sunlight planet. If the membrane is lost or damaged and light gets in, it overloads their brains. They have two of them by the way. Both would be hit with such intense neuro-activity their brains would turn to mush in ten or fifteen seconds." Loppin looked at us with a knowing glance.

"Dr. Loppin," Bellamy started again, "thank you for your time, I know it's precious. Jack, would you see to it that Dr. Loppin is escorted back to Five-One please. Again Doctor, thank you and as I said this will remain among us. Is that correct?"

"Yes it is, er, it will," Loppin got up and stopped at the door. "I would recommend using Florin in liquid form, so the spill keeps generating gas molecules in a confined area and then turn on the highest intensity lighting system you can obtain. Personnel involved should be equipped with heavily shielded goggles, rubber boots, haz-mat suits, latex gloves and scrubbers for breathing." He stood there while Bellamy looked at him, giving up nothing by his facial expression. "It'll be quick and deadly so they won't have time to don any kind of protective gear."

"Thank you, Doctor," Bellamy stood up and motioned to Jack who ushered him out. I got up and closed the door, so as not to hear Jack's diatribe about not talking or thinking about what was said as he escorted him back up to reception and the waiting security team.

"Smart man. Knows we're hunting wabbits!" Harv laughed at the other end of the phone.

"You got something really juicy on him, Harv?" Bellamy sat back in his chair, lit his pipe up and relaxed for a change.

"Yeah, well, he had a minor indiscretion with a nurse over at Five-One. Cute little thing, too." Harv chuckled.

"And ...?" Bellamy was a demon for the details.

"He's married. Fourteen years, to a cold hearted devil woman, who would not like to lose her status as a research scientist's wife," Harv laughed again.

"So he knows that as long as he plays ball you won't tell his dear, sweet, darling one?" Bellamy looked up at the ceiling.

"Pretty much the size of it. Nice to know the weak spot, isn't it?" Harv laughed out loud in his office. "He called in to some late night radio show guy one night when he thought no one was listening, and, wouldn't you know, he got caught. Talked about wanting to go public and write a tell-all bestseller. We had a chat a few days after that. Since then, he's sat in that lab of his and worked for us like a beaver."

"Can't blame a guy for trying. Would have been a bestseller too, imagine." Bellamy nodded to himself.

"Like the one you could write?" I looked at him.

"Oh yeah. 'Memoir of A Man In Black.' Book of the month club selection for fiction and horror." Bellamy sat back and waited until Jack came back and sat down.

"I presume, which is always dangerous around here, that someone came up with a better idea about Dulce than storming the front door with the Marines and having to send out a lot of letters to grieving mothers and wives," Jack said while trying to find which cup on the table was his.

"That's what I like, someone that can follow a disjointed conversation without the aid of the cue cards," Harv roared down the line.

"Hey! Where's my raise?" Jack yelled back. "You piker. You told me it would be on the last check and it wasn't."

"Minor oversight. Have to check with the accounting office. Blah-de-blah-blah! What's wrong? Not making enough for your new lifestyle?" Harv was still laughing. It somehow relieved the tension all of us felt.

I couldn't resist the temptation to join in. "His new girlfriend is more demanding and he needs to prove he's the top dog in our little pack."

"Ted!" Jack looked at me as though I had just told the story I had always promised to keep hidden from childhood.

"Sorry," I wasn't and that was ok, too.

Bellamy brought all of us back to earth. "Gentlemen, we have a mission to plan and I need all of your input. I need a good solid plan, and it must be reviewed by everyone involved before we launch. Jack, take care of the manpower side. Pick one of the crack groups from Delta and bring their commander in when you think it's right for a briefing. I will be

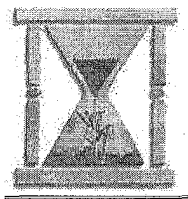
there and so will Ted. Harv, I need you to handle logistics. We will need to move a shitload of Freon without anyone knowing. We'll need FEMA involved and all the backup Haz-Mat folks you consider necessary. We'll have to evacuate the Apaches in the town around the Mesa and use some cover story. I always like the one about the nuke lost in the mountains and have them clear the area for fifteen or twenty miles. Very dramatic, but some viral outbreak is the old stand-by. Less trouble for everyone."

"Got it. I'll put all of that together as fast as possible." Harv was back to being a professional again.

"And me, Boss?" I asked.

"You are coming in with me for a few days. We got some folks to talk to." Bellamy got up and closed his folder.

There were no questions.



CHAPTER 19

We gently touched down. The airstrip was just another one in a desert somewhere north of Groom. I noticed a little green town nearby in the dimming light of sunset. We were in a small white Lear Jet just noisy enough to make talking difficult. So Bellamy and I sat back and watched the empty space of Nevada go by under our wing from thirty thousand feet. As we rolled toward a large hanger, Bellamy put together his papers and closed his briefcase.

"We can sure pick the worst spots to work in, can't we?" He moved forward and released the door, even before we were completely stopped.

"Where exactly are we?" I followed him down the ramp and off onto the tarmac next to the hanger. A car waited and his two bodyguards were ahead of us, checking out the car very quickly, issuing orders for the man standing beside it. He turned and walked back toward the hanger.

"Fallon Naval Air Station, Fallon, Nevada," he pointed. "The main area where the navy guys train is over there. This part of the field is off-limits to them. This area was a joint use training center until we finished construction. Now it's in our inventory."

We got into the backseat of the car and the two men in front of us drove off toward a more remote part of the airfield. A low flat building came into view as we rounded one of the small desert hills. We slowed and drove into a completely enclosed parking garage. Bellamy got out and I followed. As we went through the glass doors connected to the garage, it looked like we were entering a hospital or clinic of some kind. I felt my stomach tighten.

"Welcome, gentlemen." An older woman in a black business suit and white blouse came over and extended her hand. "Welcome to the 'Admiral Jacobs Facility.' We are honored to have you as some of our first guests." After shaking our hands, she walked ahead of us and told us about the various areas set aside for medical research.

"Our principal work is in aviation medicine and space biology. We have been working on a series of new sensors for monitoring vital signs during high altitude flights and the effects of upper atmospheric ionization of the human physiology and ways of preventing the injurious

effects of space borne gamma rays from causing bone cancer and bone density loss." It seemed to me like we were getting the \$2.00 tour that she did for tourists fourteen times a day, but I knew better.

"Here you go," she motioned to a set of double doors, with a sign that simply stated: "Rad Lab". Bellamy thanked her and we walked into a glass and metal room. The windows were opaque and frosted. The metal was shining aluminum. Bellamy stepped forward onto a circle indicated on the floor and placed his briefcase next to him and raised his arms.

"Bellamy, George M." A high-pitched sound filled the room and one of the panels ahead of him opened and he walked through it. He turned and pointed to me. "Humphrey, Theodore J., Jr." The room filled again with the sound and the panel opened and I walked into another world.

"This entire thing is called *Project: TEMPUS FUGIT*. It's the most advanced experimental time research center in the world. Sixteen floors of concrete and steel, riding on a set of springs at the bottom that can take a direct hit from a nuclear bomb and just bounce up and down for a few minutes. It has four nuclear power plants. Seven of the floors are living areas, set aside for members of the team. There's a shopping mall, a food court, and even a theater showing the latest Hollywood hits. The next seven floors are set aside for research projects. On fifteen, we have offices and meeting rooms. Sixteen, or as they call it here, One-Six, is dedicated to the Pit. That section is devoted exclusively to *Project: Time Runner*." Bellamy pushed a button on the wall and a silent elevator opened. The walls were glass and as we went down I could get glimpses of the other floors. The place was enormous.

The elevator glided to a stop and the doors effortlessly opened. Another corridor and two security men stood by the entrance. I started to reach for my wallet and ID.

"You don't need that here. Once you've cleared the top security screen, you can go anywhere in here. You're monitored completely. Every person can be located immediately on screen maps you will see on the walls in various locations. You can watch them move around their labs or in the living area. Every person has an RFID, radio frequency identification tag, imbedded under their skin. Vital signs can be called up on certain consoles and physical conditions can be pulled up as well. The floors have weight sensors, so we can tell if someone is carrying something in their hands and how heavy it is. Air pressure is adjusted every four seconds and extra oxygen is pumped into all areas, to facilitate alertness."

Bellamy gestured and one of the guards opened the doors for us with a smile and a nod. Bellamy returned the nod and we walked into a conference area with one glass wall. I looked through it at a room right

out of Star Trek. Seven devices sat on the floor in various configurations. My devices! The ones I had been trying to build for sixteen years!

I turned to Bellamy clenching my jaw. He looked at me and then out at the lab floor slightly below us.

"Oh," he said, marking my building rage, "those."

He sat his briefcase down on the conference table and looked over at the knot of men standing on the far side of the room. He acknowledged them, then turned back to me.

I felt bile come up in my throat as my stomach churned. My fists were clinched at my sides and I was overcome with rage at the realization that everything I had been through my entire life was a rouse.

"Do you mind telling me, why I have spent so long, playing at a game you had already won?" I could hardly get the words out.

"Simply put: time. We needed time and a decoy. You were it." Bellamy pulled out his pipe and turned back to the men on the far side of the room. "Gentlemen, would you excuse us?"

They all left quietly and without a word. Bellamy pulled one of the chrome and leather chairs out from the table and pushed it over to me, then he sat down.

"I first heard about this place when I was in New York, then I was told it was shut down and we were moving to Nevada. Now, here I am inside what we were supposed to be building at Area 51." I couldn't believe what I was looking at. This place had to be online for at least seven or eight years to be this far along. I didn't know what to believe any more.

"We are at war, Ted. We have been for some time. You've been one of the front line troops busting your ass every day, getting the shit kicked out of you for good measure, but that is the cost of fighting a war." Bellamy wasn't apologizing. He was just making a statement that to him was clear as day.

"So what have I been doing?" I still felt anger welling up inside.

"You are responsible for all of this being here, Ted. Your work, every breakthrough you have made is reflected in that room. The final piece, the confirmation of all this, came the other night when you got those formulas. They were compared to what we had and everybody down here, relaxed. We were right. More importantly; you were right. You were right years ago at Montauk when you laid out the information for the first jump series. We knew then you were responsible for it. We just built it, that's all. But what is really important is that the other side believes we're still struggling with the math and the formulas and clicking around with that little device at Groom. They think we're still seven to ten years behind schedule and that, my friend, is what is going to keep them off balance, because they do not know we are almost ready." Bellamy got up, opened his briefcase and pulled out a Com unit. He hit a button and

spoke. His back was turned to me and I didn't hear him or just didn't care. Everyone came back in and stood at attention in their white lab smocks with folded hands. Something was going on.

"Will someone pull up the screens please?" Bellamy asked and a man near the wall hit a set of buttons. Three screens came up out of a piece of furniture. On the right was Jack Thompson in full uniform, sitting at a desk with an American Flag behind him. On the left was Harv, in a suit with the same patriotic background. The middle screen showed just an empty desk flanked by flags and curtains.

A voice came from all around us.

"Gentlemen, the President of the United States."

President Ronald Reagan sat down at the desk.

"Dr. Bellamy, Dr. Glipsen, Dr. Humphrey, Colonel Thompson and members of the staff of the Jacobs Research Facility. Thank you for allowing me to have a few moments of your time. It is an honor and privilege to be able to address you today. Now, I understand this is an unusual situation, but we live in difficult times. The work you have done in the past, and will continue to do, for this great land of ours and for the rest of this little blue green planet, cannot be measured in words. I understand the great sacrifices many of you have made for all of us and if it were up to me, well, I would have the biggest ticker tape parade down Broadway since the astronauts came home from the moon, for you folks. But the reality is we must keep all of this very quiet. I have had to resort to this kind of ceremony which, to me, is demeaning to the man we are here to recognize today. That being said, let me now extend the thanks of a grateful nation and a thankful world, as well as my own humble gratitude to you, Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr., for services above and beyond anything that any man can imagine. For what you have done and accomplished is, by and large, the greatest single service that any hero could have ever provided for his nation. In that vein, I would ask Dr. Bellamy to hand you that blue box, please." The President paused.

Bellamy pulled opened the lid on the blue velvet box and held it up so I could see it. "This," Reagan went on, "is The Congressional Medal of Freedom. It is the highest honor this nation can award to any civilian."

A tear formed in the corner of my eye.

"This country owes a great debt of gratitude to you Dr. Humphrey. I have read the reports submitted by Dr. Bellamy, Dr. Glipsen, and Colonel Thompson. All of them are glowing and filled with praise for your valor, courage and dedication to this great cause of ours. It is a small token of appreciation from a grateful nation to one of our heroes, regrettably unsung, though you may be."

The President paused again. Bellamy laid a citation out on the table in a leather portfolio that stated the date and time of the award. He then took it out of the box and hung the ribbon around my neck.

"We cannot give up our vigilance, nor can we forget that we fight a dreadful and terrible enemy. But as long as we have people like you, Dr. Humphrey, we have a chance of not just winning but prevailing. Your work has been the guiding light for several new research projects that will enable us to meet and defend against any enemy from any place in our universe without fear of defeat. We are small by comparison with many worlds but our resolve is great and someday, in the not too distant future, when we have proven that we are not slaves on our knees to masters who would use us wrongly, but men equal to any beings in this universe, we shall be admitted to the Great Council that governs space with a gentle and caring universal understanding that all beings deserve respect and the ability to chart their path to the stars."

The President tilted his head as though he was actually in the room looking at me, and grinned that famous crooked half smile.

"I have been lucky enough to have been taken into the inner circle of the Group and have been told, not all, but a great deal of what you men do each and every day and I must tell you that I am glad that we have such men as you. Men that are willing to place everything on the line to protect the rest of us, without ever asking, what is in it for me. With people like this, how can anyone possibly believe they can defeat us?"

"Dr. Humphrey, we will probably never meet in person, for that I am truly saddened, but when this is all done and over, if you're ever in California, you come by the ranch and we'll ride a horse, drink an iced tea and watch the sunset together. You, sir, are always welcome in my world.

"With that being said, I must again, extended the thanks of this nation and this world to all of you that work so hard for all of us. Thank you again. May God bless you, may God bless America, and may God bless this good, good Earth.

"Thank you and good day."

The screen went blank and I heard the thunderous applause of twenty-five or so other people standing in the room behind me I hadn't even heard come in. Men and women all in white lab coats, tears in their eyes, clapping and cheering for me. Bellamy shook my hand then slapped me on the back. "That's from the Gipper!" He said. Harv was saying something, but the clapping drowned him out. I didn't know what to do.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jacobs Research Facility," Bellamy motioned for silence and everyone calmed down. "Ladies and Gentlemen I would like to introduce you to the new director of the Jacobs

Research Facility, Dr. Theodore Humphrey. The President's, and more importantly, my, best friend."

Bellamy played to the crowd and they started to clap again. I felt myself blush and still didn't know what to say. I turned back to the screen and saw Harv pointing to something in the back of the room. He was mouthing a word to me. I turned and looked around the white lab coats and saw black hair, with a streak of white and a woman with glasses clapping for me. I strained and pulled out my glasses to get a better look at who was standing among the others, when the lab coats all parted like a foam white sea.

Irina.

I bolted across the room as people were saying different words of congratulations, slapping my back. I moved through the throng, fearful she'd disappear and that it was just another hallucination, but she was there and real. I grabbed her and pulled her to me, embracing her with tears streaming down my face.

"Irina! Where? How?" I held her at arm's length. Bellamy was motioning the others away and herding them out of the room. The two screens went blank and we were left alone in the conference room.

"It was Harvey. He pulled me out just before it got bad at the lab in the Urals. The whole place was destroyed within weeks. They said it was an overload in the circuitry, but I know it was an attack by one of them. The ones that tried to kill us both years ago." She smiled and had tears in her eyes as well.

"Pasha?" I asked.

"She is nine now. She is upstairs in school. We live here in the facility. I have been here for two years now." She laughed at me as my face turned beet red.

"I will personally thank Harv, then kill him." I said through my teeth.

"It doesn't matter, we are here together now. Let's give it some time and see if we still even like each other." She laughed again.

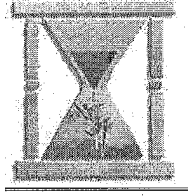
"Irina?" I looked at her.

"You got married again I hear. That certainly shows depth of commitment." She acted hurt and then laughed once again. "Later! We will talk later. We have plenty of time now, to catch up on things."

I hesitated then asked. "Are you married or involved?" I felt my heart skip a beat.

"Involved, yes. Married, no." She waited to see my expression. "You have that one coming. I am involved in my work here and with our daughter. That is the extent of my involvement as compared to you Americans that trade woman in like cars." She laughed again and took me by the arm and led me to an adjoining area where a party was in full

swing. Bellamy held out two glasses of champagne as we walked into the room.



CHAPTER 20

Bellamy handed both of us a glass of champagne, and he took my hand and started shaking it. "Someday you will have the gratitude of a grateful country, and a grateful world. But that is only going to be when people start to wake up. And when they Wake Up, they will only then realize that we can only defend our world when everyone WAKES UP! SO WAKE UP! WAKE UP, TED? TED? WAKE UP!"

Two shudders went through the entire building. I looked up at the ceiling and the room went black.

"Ted!" I heard Bellamy's voice and his hand was shaking me. "Ted wake up, will you please! WAKE UP! WAKE UP!"

I slowly opened my eyes and Bellamy was looking down at me. The background behind him formed a semi-circular space that looked like the leather upholstery in a car or something.

"Did they hit us?" I came awake with a start. "Where's Irina? Where's Pasha?" I swung my hand to the side and hit it on the armrest in the Lear Jet. I tried to get up, only to find I was still buckled in the seat on the aircraft.

"You were pretty deep asleep, my friend," Bellamy leaned back in the other chair.

"No, I wasn't!" I slumped in the seat and looked out the window at the desert airstrip we had just landed on and then back at Bellamy.

"What is it, Ted?" Bellamy sat down in the chair across from me and released the lock on it so he could swivel it around and face me. The pilot came out of the cockpit and opened the door and the cabin was flooded with the hot dry air of the desert. "Leave the ground power unit on and keep the air-conditioner going for a few, Captain."

The pilot acknowledged the statement with a nod and went back into the flight deck cabin.

"What just happened, Ted? Tell me slowly, take your time." Bellamy pulled out his pipe.

"We were at Fallon Naval Air Station. You're going to take me over to the Jacobs Research Center and introduce me to the staff. Irina works there now, since her facility in Russia was hit by the aliens and almost

everyone was killed." I held my breath and closed my eyes for a moment. Without answering what I had just told him, Bellamy asked me a different question. "How big is the facility?"

"Sixteen floors underground, an air and space medical research facility on the surface as a cover for our activities. There are seven devices in the pit on the floor they called 'One-Six'." I paused and opened my eyes again. The man across from me was leaning in, staring at me intently.

"Tell me the whole story, Ted. Leave nothing out," Bellamy opened his brief case flicked on a built-in recorder and started to make notes as we talked for the next two hours, still sitting on the airplane.

When I finished relating the story right down to the most finite detail, I felt exhausted. Bellamy closed his notebook and got up.

"Let's go see what you're talking about." He descended the aircraft and I followed, putting on my dark glasses. An open white Navy Jeep sat near us on an empty runway. Bellamy got in and we drove across the base. We pulled up in front of a low unfinished cement structure and walked in through an open space where the door should have been. A man in a white construction hat came over and greeted Bellamy.

"Is the lift working?" Bellamy asked.

"It is, but the air driver still makes it a rough ride down. It's fine coming up, but we don't have it adjusted all the way just yet." The man hit the call button and I looked at the hole in the ceiling where the security screener should have been. Bellamy watched me as I moved into the elevator. "This all look familiar?" He asked.

"It was complete, with glass and chrome, polished aluminum and textured floors." The elevator went down, stopped and went down again, the ride was jumpy and hesitant. The doors opened onto a large empty bay with construction lights strung across the ceiling and I walked to the place where the windows should have been and looked down into an empty chamber below.

"This is where you planned to move the second set of devices you're having built somewhere else," I pointed into the pit. Bellamy sat down on a stack of boxes and rubbed his hand through his thick hair.

"Are the reactors in place, yet?" I turned back to face him full on. "No, Ted. They are not. This is a shell. Funding for it was cut and we don't know if The Group can get the funds to finish it. There's a lot of opposition from Congress and the White House," Bellamy continued to look at the floor.

"That means you haven't told the President about The Group or the projects yet, correct?" I added turning back to the view of the empty pit.

"Only minor explanations. Introductions to what we do about monitoring saucer activity. The Directors thought this man would be

reactionary to the point of wanting to try to take over the operation completely and insert his own cronies. Our foreign programs have been hamstrung as well. More and more 'black' funds are being diverted to special programs in Europe and South America. It all takes money and the way things are right now, we are in a funding crisis." Bellamy looked at the floor and rubbed his hands together. "With the recent amount of publicity all of this has been generating, with books about government cover ups and writers using the Freedom of Information Act to access CIA and DOD files, everyone is running scared. All the crap about Roswell coming out has made those who normally don't care about such things, rethink their positions. There are those in Congress that want to force a GAO audit of the operation and hold public hearings to determine if we have exceeded our mandate. It's just crazy, right now." The man never looked up. "Lobbyists are trying to get funds diverted to aerospace companies and universities to conduct the research and they claim it'd be better for fiscal responsibility and openness. The old ploy of using the Soviets as the threat, is losing ground since everyone believes that within two years, 7 years at the most, the whole system over there will collapse. Funny, when they never have been the actual threat."

I looked into the pit and wondered if the premonition, dream, time jump, or whatever it was, had a hidden meaning.

"Get Harvey a new suit," I said succinctly. "You will go to President Reagan, You will show him the program. Top to bottom. Take the pictures of the aliens and all the stuff about Dulce. Pull no punches. Bring him in and then you and Harv scare the living shit out of him! Threaten him with assassination or worse if he openly talks about it!" I said hearing the ruthlessness in my own voice.

"He won't take the bait, Ted. I know him," Bellamy added.

"Oh my God! It isn't fucking bait, George!" I turned and looked directly at the man yelling in his face. "There might, just *might*, be people that want to save this planet, too, George! People that will help us if you just let them! People who are as terrified of these lizard motherfuckers as I am! But they can't help us if they don't KNOW what we are doing! And if they don't know, how they can help? For once in your fucked up, dastardly, double dealing, double crossing life, tell the goddamn truth! TELL HIM EVERYTHING!"

He got up and looked in my eyes.

"What haven't you told me?"

I took a folded piece of paper out of the breast pocket of my jacket. I found it after we left the Desert Inn in Death Valley. Atkins had put it there.

I hesitated for a long while, thinking about the future this would bring, then handed it to Bellamy. He unfolded it and read the carefully

written note. Not until Bellamy had explained why the project had slowed down did comprehension begin to dawn on me, and I had not understood the message in that note until this very moment.

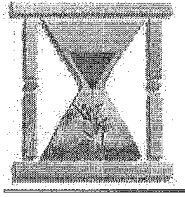
"Give that to the President," I said staring at the rough-hewn unfinished floor and then up at the bare grey cave walls where all our futures would be, literally, written in stone. "Tell him everything. When you've finished he'll still be slightly reluctant until he reads that. He will then call his wife into the room. Don't be surprised and don't ask any questions, George. Not now and not then."

I walked back over to the elevator and hit the call button. Bellamy followed me in without a word.

The ride going up was much smoother than the long trip down.

PART FOUR

THE DULCE WAR



CHAPTER 21

The plane ride back to Groom Lake was quiet. Bellamy had been on the phone for almost the full hour talking to Harv in DC. When we landed, I saw the re-fueling truck coming out towards the airplane. I already knew the Boss was headed back east to meet with Harv. We were in another game where the pot was huge and everything, all the black chips, were on the green felt table. I started to walk off the plane and then turned after our good-byes.

"Boss, I need you to do one other thing for me." He looked up from his notes.

"What is that, Ted?"

"Get Irina out." I said in a flat tone. "And my daughter. I want them here with me. Please."

Bellamy took his glasses off and looked at me for a long moment, then sighed. "If it can be done, I'm sure Harv will make it so." Not the answer I wanted but good enough.

I watched the aircraft move onto the main strip. I was in the shadow of the building, really not sure of what I should do next. It was a waiting game now, hoping Harv and Bellamy could pull off the best acting job of their careers. It'd be harder than most since they were performing for another actor who knew all the cues really well. The sleek jet lifted into the airspace above Five-One and a white glint was all I could see as it turned east climbing out to altitude.

"Want a Coke?" My old friend the black janitor walked out of the hanger in his coveralls, holding two cans of soda. He wiped off the moisture with his handy red rag and handed me one looking up at the empty space where the airplane had been moments before.

"How is Dad?" I asked without looking into his old wrinkled charcoal face. He opened his soda and took a long pull.

"Oh, he's fine. Sends his regards. He's more concerned 'bout how you holdin' up?" The old man didn't look at me at all.

"Fair to midland, I guess," I opened my Coke and enjoyed the cold liquid running down the back of my throat.

"Figured that. All dis stuff 'bout jumping 'tween dimensions and timelines can cause a body to not know what's real and what's in their head, I think." He looked at the red striped sweating aluminum can in his hand. "When I started in this business, these things came in beautiful glass bottles. I liked the those better. I think everyone did. Felt good to hold an icy cold bottle in yer hand." He shrugged. It looked like just two guys standing on the ramp talking about airplanes.

"Since we keep meeting, how about giving me your name. Your real name." I still didn't look at him.

"Don't you laugh now, y'hear?" I nodded in agreement. "Rufus. Rufus T. Henry," the man laughed to himself. "My folks were poor dirt farmers in Oklahoma and that sounded like a good strong farmer's name to them when I came along. Daddy thought I'd take over the farm, but I won me a college scholarship. Went on to the University of Oklahoma, played varsity ball for the Sooners. Majored in physics and after that I went on to the University of Chicago."

"Worked with Fermi?" I asked already knowing the answer.

"Did. Nice man! Too careful. Didn't want to push beyond power production with atoms. Everyone else in the field wanted to build the bomb. I wanted to work in a different area. Quantum Mechanics. Enrico told me it'd be the end of my career. A dead end field he told me." Rufus crushed the can in his hand. "Enough energy in the atoms of that can to run this base for a year."

"If you know how to get it out," I finally turned and looked him in the face and he smiled.

"You ain't scared of seeing any more of me, are you?" The older man laughed to himself.

"Oh, hell no! In fact, I look forward to seeing you, Dr. Rufus T. Henry. Somehow you make my work easier, knowing that somehow you guys are behind me, helping," I still wasn't sure if I'd completely fallen into a deep psychosis or not. But if anyone saw me talking to myself, I was sure I'd be humping a couch for the base shrink again, very soon.

"Just Rufus. I don't use that other stuff much anymore. Don't need to." He turned and looked down the ramp. "They'll be coming for you pretty soon," I turned to look at what he was seeing.

"Who?"

"Your friend Jack, and his driver. They'll want to get you out of the heat. Delayed them just a little bit with a piece of fuzz under the distributor cap so we could have a quick chat." He laughed. "Time is limited, so here is my best advice: take out those scabs at Dulce as quick as possible. It'll cause all kinda holy hell and disruption with their bosses... out there." He pointed to the sky. "That'll buy you, and this planet, a couple of extra years, at least, twenty years at most. Then push it

to floor. Drive those fobs that work for you, night and day, night and day! You got all the details now. Build'em! Build all seven of them devices and get those holes closed first. Then we got us a fightin' chance. But it all depends on you, and that school motto of yours," he held up two fingers in a victory sign. "Fight On!" He shuffled away back into the hanger.

"Dr. Henry?" I asked the retreating shadow. "When will I see you again?"

"When you need me most you will see me again, Ted." He moved into the darkness of the interior of the hanger.

"Say hello to my clad for me," I called after him.

"I'll let him know you sent your best, Teddy," he said as the voice faded.

A young airman came out of the hanger door and looked around.

"Is everything alright, sir?" He asked looking me up and down.

"It's all fine," I turned and watched the approaching car.

"I heard voices and wondered if there were folks out here that needed some assistance," he was still trying to figure out why a man in a business suit was standing in front of his hanger.

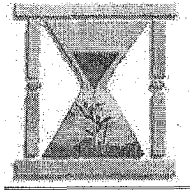
"I talk to myself. That's what all of us egghead geek types do." The military vehicle pulled up. Jack got out and opened the back door for me.

"Oh, okay." The airman looked at the car and Jack and decided it was better to head back to his own area and leave me well enough alone.

"Was he bothering you, Ted?" Jack looked sternly at the young man.

"No, no! Calm clown. Don't kill anybody today! We were just talking about whether Coke should come in bottles or cans." I got in the back seat and shut my eyes.

Right now it was time for some forward thinking,



CHAPTER 22

Several weeks went by and I hadn't heard from Bellamy at all. When Harv called it was all about the present project at Groom and there was little to no comment about anything else.

The staff had been working hard on making the equations of my mysterious Visitor, Mr. Atkins, function with the new designs and everyone was busy. I watched from a distance as Jack and Shirley became close. As this happened, it just made my world feel more empty than ever before. To keep from sinking into self-pity, I drove myself to work on all aspects of the Dulce Archeleta Mesa battle plan. The new name for it was "*Project: Dzit Dit Gaii*", the Jicarilla Apache word for the mountain which meant "White Mesa". At first there was resistance to the unwieldy nom de guerre, but it caught on when someone joked D.D.G. stood for "*Destroy Dem Grays*", which everyone liked best.

I first determined where each airshaft and entrance to the place was. The original Dulce cavern was known to the Native Americans, and was first explored by the Murdock Expedition. They found the bodies of Apache warriors and desiccated grey aliens side by side, along with piles of technology they didn't understand at the time. So it looked as though this war had been going on longer than anyone knew, with the Apaches as the first humans to fight the Visitor menace, and who knows how long the Visitors had used the place before that.

Next an Army Corp of engineers had gone in using explosives to widen the place out, drilling access tunnels to connect it to the greater underground grid. The base was built as a nuclear waste dump, but that plan was scrapped. The place was abandoned, until someone came up with the bright idea of a genetic research facility and the fun began.

But all this made it a mysterious rabbit warren of tunnels and caves and pockets and nooks and crannies, so no one really knew what the actual layout of the place was or what to expect. On top of all this, the Mesa itself was loaded with lead, nickel, tungsten and zinc which made it virtually impossible to scan with CPR; Ground Penetrating Radar.

I pulled up all the blue prints in our special control room we used in case of emergencies, much like the one at the Cayman Island facility. We had ours buried in a sub-basement under the old flight service center, next to the main laboratory building. It had direct connects to the Caymans, Sao Paolo, Jo'berg in South Africa and the fourth control center near Alice Springs in Australia. Mine was small and consisted of one large room, but I had all the displays and communications consoles that Jack or I would need if he were working a problem, as it had instant communications to the others by wire, satellite and fiber optic cable, all taking different routes.

While I was down in the "Hole" I had to monitor the traffic from the other centers. There was always something happening. They would be monitoring deep space satellites that would pick up meteorites moving in our direction, or experimental space launches around the world, atmospheric conditions and solar activities. So the air was always filled with routine traffic as well as the overlay of Air Force Command Communications, logging and monitoring everything moving in high altitude air space. I was aware that when I was in the hole and online, that my computer console would show up in Bellamy's control center as a green light, showing the status as being up and working. But there were no exchanges between us.

I worked slowly through each level of the Dulce complex. Noting every detail of the facility. I wanted to know every twist and turn of the place. But we also didn't know what the Visitors had changed while they had control of the place.

The light was the problem. I couldn't figure out how to get high intensity lighting into the place, without giving up our hole card to the Visitors. So, I put that issue aside and went on to survey the adjoining areas.

That's when I realized Harv's super-secret high-speed underground railroad, had a platform station right at the bottom of the Hive complex. Caves are famous for having methane pockets. This had always been a danger to miners and spelunkers. If you walked into one, you were as good as dead on your first breath. But it would be like Heaven for the Visitors, taking in a breath of home in the same environment. When the original planners set out the route for the high-speed rail system several hundred feet below ground, they used existing cave complexes as much as possible. Dulce had smaller tributary cave systems most of which had never been mapped.

Harv made the arrangements for a small, armed squad to escort me to the Dulce Station Platform. He told someone, probably Tugy, there'd be a survey team in the area to check on track conditions and make some repairs. Harv didn't want me going, but finally relented when I told him it

would do no good if I didn't see everything down there to make sure they didn't have any escape routes.

Jack wanted to go along, and Harv insisted on it for my protection. So I had to give a little to get what I wanted. I was certain if Shirley found out she'd be mad as hell at me for taking him into harm's way.

* * * * *

After a week of planning we arrived at our destination. The small single subway car pulled up to the station and ten members of the team, besides Jack and I, emerged looking like the stars of that Michael Creighton movie *The Andromeda Strain*. Yellow rubber jump suits, re-breathers at the ready, attached lights to our helmets and geared up with side arms and spray canisters of Florin, which could be fired out ten or twelve feet. We had a grid map developed and each two man team had a specific area to check and video. Jack and I were to freelance the area and see if we could find any openings within a quarter mile of the station that hadn't been mapped. We all had communication sets built into the suits, but were on strict orders for radio silence unless something came up, where one member of the team needed assistance quickly. If we got jumped down here by the Visitors there would be no help or hope of rescue. We were on our own, and everyone knew what that meant.

Jack pulled up his visor to speak to me directly not using the com-link.

"The last time I felt like this I was shot down over North Viet Nam. Took me three days to walk out to a spot where Evac could pick me up." Jack looked around at the darkness in the cave and shuddered.

"Big difference here, old buddy," I said to him.

"What's that?" "No
Evac Team."

"That's what I love about you; Ted. Comforting words from our fearless leader!"

He slid his faceplate back down and we moved off in a southwest direction. A quarter of a mile of searching showed nothing in the form of a hole or path off the main artery of the tracks. We turned and headed northeast passing the crews working the platform area and filming everything.

Our lights were covering every crack and rock break as we slowly walked abreast up the line. I was aware that we had covered the quarter mile and Jack was slowing down, getting ready to head back, but in my light I saw a faint fissure ahead of us. I wanted to go a little farther even though he was motioning to head back and pointing at his watch on the outside of his sleeve.

on. "What took us so long?" I screamed. "Why didn't we deal with this sooner? Our government, our WORLD, has a DEAL with these FUCKING' MONSTERS!?" I was beyond hysterical now.

"Ted!" Jack grabbed my face and forced me to look into his clear crystal blue eyes. "TED!" He shook me.

I felt myself coming back down, realizing I wasn't as tough as I thought I was. I took a breath. "Okay...I'm...okay..."

Jack turned to the team with sharp, decisive hand motions. Two members came to my side and helped me stand. The others got closer to Jack and stood at the ready.

"I'm going in," Jack said. "I'll film this, then we are beating feet out of here!" It wasn't a request.

Jack reached for my camera and I grabbed a handful of his suit.

"Jack! We didn't start this war, but I swear to you, with God as my witness, we will end it! I will do everything in my power to wipe these motherfuckers off the face of this Earth! You understand me? *I will destroy them!*"

Jack nodded, took my camera and moved into the fissure, telling the other men to stay out in the main cave and cover his back. The two assigned to me, helped me walk back to the platform and the waiting train car.

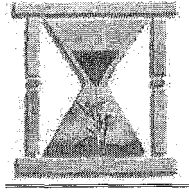
It seemed like an eternity, but when he finally jumped aboard followed by the rest of the team, his face was red with rage and his eyes were burning holes through everything.

"Get us the hell out of here, Johnson. Now!" He yelled at the man, from pure anger and frustration.

I leaned against the side of the car and sat transfixed by the image of the room under our lights still in front of my eyes. I was afraid it would be burned there forever. I never thought I could see something that would horrify me so much. I desperately tore off my helmet, held it between my knees and puked in it. No one said a word. Jack put his arm around my shoulders. I felt awful and didn't care if I'd embarrassed myself or not. It just didn't matter.

Nothing else would matter! Ever again! Until they were dead!

All...Fucking...DEAD!



CHAPTER 23

We were sitting in the Hole at central command watching the films from Dulce. There was seven minutes of the darkened areas with nothing of note.

"Wow, interesting shit, Ted. Guided tour through a New York subway? So what? What's your point here?" Harv said gruffly on the com-link, as though we were wasting his precious time. Bellamy said nothing from the island.

"Stand-by, Boss Two," Jack said as I sat chewing at my lower lip.

"You see the doorway. We can block it so nothing can get out after we use it to enter from below, while the top team works down from Yellow-Level- Three," Jack added.

"Hmff. Illuminating!" Harv, being a sarcastic bastard, as always.

The frame flickered and the scene opened to the cavern filled with bleached human remains. Jack had walked deeper into the chamber than I expected, filming at least twenty-five piles of bones, each a good twelve feet high. He panned in on a set of children's bones, small and fractured, like they had been gnawed on, the size of a five or six year old child. Next to it was a curly haired blonde baby doll in a tattered pink dress, its blue plastic eyes wide open, staring directly into the lens, accusing all of us for letting this happen for so long.

Jack lifted the camera and panned around the cavern, littered with bones and rotting flesh and parts of bodies for as far as the light would penetrate.

There was silence from the com-link speakers.

"I-i-is this something you two found in a George Romero film ... or .. this can't be real. Is this... real?" Harv's voice wasn't gruff anymore, but of someone trying to come to terms.

I still wasn't ready to say anything. Jack looked at me and demonstrated his normal professionalism that secreted from every pore of his being.

"This is the real deal, Boss Two. Estimates are over two hundred thousand sets are contained in that chamber," Jack made it sound like a typical description of a normal event, somehow.

"No skulls," Bellamy finally acknowledged his presence.

"Exactly correct." Jack added back.

"Why...why are there no skulls?" Harv asked, puzzled.

"Trophies," I said. The video stopped. Harv and Bellamy came back up on the screens.

"Trophies? What the hell do you mean trophies?" Harv was trying to deal with the images just like we'd tried to deal with the reality of the scene in the chamber.

"Ancient Aztecs keep the heads of their victims and built walls with them in their temples. It was a sign of how victorious they were," Bellamy's voice sounded flat in a tone like death.

"Wonder where they got that idea?" Harv asked quietly.

"Exactly," Bellamy responded.

"Want to show THIS to the President?" I spat with contempt.

"I'll show him, just not yet. It should be presented after we've closed that place with Operation: DDG," Bellamy answered back.

"Are we going to be able to?" I brightened at the prospect of providing a little payback to some unwanted Visitors.

"I've waited to tell you two the results of our meeting," Bellamy paused to make both Jack and I hang on the edge of our seats.

"And?" I finally asked.

"He was non-committal for the better part of two hours explaining to us, in depth, his new Star Wars Program he was ordering and how things had to change to keep up with the times around the world, blah-ditty- blah, blah, and a few etceteras," Harv started and then paused.

"Then I handed him the letter you gave me," Bellamy added.

"That came as a big surprise to some of us outside the loop, I must tell you," Harv added, looking glum into the camera in front of him. That was more for Bellamy than for us.

"He called Nancy into the Oval Office and had her read it. She sat on the couch and read it three or four times. She left without saying a word, then came back in a couple minutes later with another letter on the same letterhead and handed both of them to the President. He looked at them and asked if he could keep the one I handed to him," Bellamy paused for dramatic effect. "Then he opened up our file and crossed out the bottom line cost projections," Bellamy added in his flat tone.

"What does that mean?" Jack was going crazy at all the foreplay going on between us.

"What that means is he just handed us the biggest blank check in the history of the world. He told us there is no limit to what we need to do

and however much it cost we will make sure our government, and twenty-five other governments around the world, will pick up the tab. We got a green light on the Jacobs Center, expansion of Groom Lake, the new HAARP facility in Alaska and the two new massive underground complexes that are on the drawing board for the new US Space Command Headquarters under King's Peak in Utah and the Bangor Submarine Base in Washington State." Harv was laughing out loud.

"And Dulce?" I added with venom in my voice.

"He wants it gone. He was ready to nuke it by the time we were through. We need to hold onto this film, until afterwards, otherwise he'd lose his mind and nuke it right now, along with half of New Mexico." Bellamy added and followed up with; "I don't know who or what dealt you that hand Teddy, but it was a Royal Flush, Ace high. Well clone!"

I sat back and studied his face

"And my other request?" I wondered if it had fallen on deaf ears or not.

"*Project: Greenhouse?*" Bellamy added.

"Okay?" I said, waiting for the answer.

Harv smiled his mischievous smile. "It wasn't easy. You probably know that, but both of them are safe in London at a quarantine center under our control. They're both fine and after talking to her and explaining everything I know, she's ready to come back here, with only one stipulation."

I already knew she probably hated me and would not want to be near me. Irina had been too frightened to want to be around me again, I was sure of that. It didn't matter; I just wanted her and my daughter to be safe.

"And that is, Harv?" I waited expecting the worst.

"She wants to continue her work, and that includes being where ever you are." Harv chuckled. I felt myself slump in my chair. "Christmas in July, Sunny Jim!" Harv added.

Jack looked at him unaware of what the current conversation was about, but didn't bother to ask.

"Boss One, what was in the letter Mrs. Reagan had?" I still wanted some additional information.

"I don't know, Ted. But it had the impact of a sledgehammer. I think the one you had was... expected ... by her, and when it showed up in our hands, we suddenly became the angelic Messengers from the Great Beyond," Bellamy added and continued. "I flew to London earlier this week to make sure no one bothers Irina with any type of debriefing and made sure those jerks at CIA wouldn't think she was some kind of asset for them to play with."

"Thank you for that. How is she?" I asked, hoping I could get a better feel of the lay of the land.

"Confused, scared, upset. All of which is to be expected after the job Ratterman did on her, to get her to defect back to the Commies. I took enough paperwork and proof that she understands now she was a victim of a major double cross and is smarting from having left the way she did. I told her that you would understand," Bellamy was showing concern at a level that was hard for me to believe.

"And Ellen? You tell Irina about her?" I wondered just how far the membership in The Group went and if one person's problems became everyone's problems.

"Just enough to allow you to fill in the blanks that only you and her need to talk about. Okay?" Bellamy wanted to move on and leave family relationships to us.

"Pasha?" I had one more question. I thought of the sight I had seen in the cave and knew I never wanted to see anyone's child's bones on that pile.

"Beautiful. Really. And I hate kids. She's bright and charming as an angel. You are a lucky man." Bellamy reluctantly added.

"Now if we can travel down some other street than Memory Lane, gentlemen?" Harv barked.

"Shut up Harv!" I yelled back, covering a tear in my eye, then I laughed. "And thank you! You old bastards!"

"I think that's a compliment, but a little twisted around for old Harvey," Jack said. Harv looked hurt on the screen. "Anyway, when are we moving on Dulce, Boss?"

"Two weeks from today, at zero dark thirty. Jack and Ted, you will be with me in the second wave into the hole. Harv will hold the baby at Groom, with two sets of back up teams, at both ends of the section of track, east and west of the Dulce Platform, besides the main assault group that is going in hot." Bellamy held a piece of paper and read it as he spoke.

"I want to go with the first wave," I said flatly to him.

"Me, too. I'm a combat veteran and I want to go with the first bunch of boys going in that hellhole." Jack said with a fixed glare. He hadn't shown it back when we were in the cavern, but his voice told me volumes about the effect it had on him.

"Negative, both of you. We're going in the second group as support and back up. We need to see if we can get in and clean out the Hive of all the information we can, before I reduce that mesa into a quarry." Bellamy looked directly at the camera. "There will be no discussion on this matter, is that understood?"

Both of us nodded reluctantly. "You both are old enough to be retired from active duty in any military in the world, so don't even think about it. Clear?" Bellamy knew if there were any way both of us would

probably try, so he was making doubly sure there were no misunderstandings or loopholes for us to get our way.

"Yes, sir," Jack answered. "But we still don't have a method of using lighting in there. We've reviewed every way we know how to use searchlights, but we can't do it. Plus the ones we have are huge."

"Not a problem now." Bellamy held up a small black device, no bigger than a shoebox, with a lens on the front. "A one million candle power, handheld searchlight, developed by Peripheral Systems in Oregon. The Navy just signed a contract for two hundred. The first batch came in for testing. They all work and they have a lifespan of four hours on constant." He held up a piece of paper about two feet from the lens, turned his head and hit the button. The camera flared from the light blast and when it re-focused Bellamy was dropping a piece of smoking ash.

"You could tell a fellow to put on his dark glasses before you did that little trick, for Christ sakes," Harv growled.

"Sorry." Bellamy rubbed his eyes.

"What kind of lens is in that thing?" Jack asked.

"Not the lens, it's the bulb: halogen quartz. New stuff. Brighter than sunlight in a darkened area," Bellamy smiled his most evil grin.

"Where do we go in, top or bottom?" I wondered what horrors we were going to find walking into this cesspool.

"Topside. Full rad suits. We follow the sweepers and strikers after the mop up guys certify a floor is clean. Dr. Loppin told me that we make sure we don't touch any of the blood from these boogies, because it will eat through your skin like acid. We'll have a complete decontamination setup on Yellow-Level-Three. Nobody comes out until they're certified clean from him and his staff." Bellamy went down the page and looked up at the camera. "Harv, the base Evac and adjoining areas, is that under control?"

"Hanta virus outbreak, all over the area, twenty-four hours before. All of the staff and the folks in the reservation town below the Mesa will be moved out, really quick. We'll have the top and bottom sealed, so even if they know something is up, they won't have the time to respond. I hope." Harv added with a grimace.

"It has to do. We can't afford to give them too much warning. It will take them a few hours to figure out what we are doing." Bellamy added.

"Unless they already know our plans." I said glumly.

"I've had the same thought. But I have it on good authority, that they won't know." Bellamy didn't expand on his comment and didn't have to. We were all aware of his meetings with "someone" from "someplace else".

"I can live with that." Jack nodded.

"Anything else?" Bellamy asked closing his file.

"Yeah. Can we have a beer bust and pizza party when this little stunt is over?" Harv tried to lighten up the conversation in his usual way.

"I will personally buy the beer." Bellamy said. "Boss One, offline."

The screen went dead.

"Harv?" I said.

"Three weeks, kiddo. I don't want her in country until we're done with this scalping raid. Boys, if you get a chance, when the Boss ain't watching, kill one of those stinking sons of bitches for me, will ya?"

"I will personally bring you the ears, Harv." Jack said.

Harv clicked off.

"Amen and ditto for me." I got up and headed back up topside.

"Want a beer?"

"Two or twelve would be in order, 'cause I am done for today." Jack closed his file and turned the system off.

"You going to be okay going back down there?" Jack asked as we walked outside and put on dark glasses heading for the car.

"Hell no. But I'm going to be there. I have intrusive images of what we are going to find down there and I keep waking up nights thinking about what people are going through in that place." I got in and slammed the door. Jack slid behind the wheel and pointed over to Five-One, to go have a drink. I nodded approvingly.

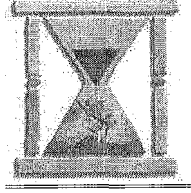
"I don't have that same problem." He added.

"What have you done to get rid of the nightmares?" I looked at the side of his face and realized that his hair had been turning gray at the temples in the last two years. The job was taking its toll on him, as well.

"I just gave up sleeping. I don't like waking up in the middle of the night screaming," he smiled, never paying attention to his driving. "It wakes up Shirley."

"Yeah, I know. Nobody wants the dorm rooms on either side of mine in the bachelors quarters." I laughed a sad guffaw.

The day was clear and they would probably be testing the new bird tonight, but maybe they would have it on the ramp, so we could watch it run up and down the tarmac without thinking about our future engagement with the 'things' at Dulce.



CHAPTER 24

It was about three in the morning when we assembled outside the Dulce Archeleta Mesa facility. All of the security cameras had been shut down on the surface, so no one could plug into them.

There were 100 crack Delta Team members, all in full radiation gear waiting for the word that everything in the subterranean tunnels was ready to go. The warriors from Delta were all silent young men with grim faces and hard countenances. These were not your average soldiers. These were handpicked, highly trained professionals that were ready to execute whatever orders given without question. They had been briefed at White Sands, New Mexico, the military rocket base then held there incommunicado for the past two days. They were tense and ready to do the job at hand and that job was to kill every alien in this facility, bar one: Lord Tugy. He was to be taken alive, if at all possible, but not at the cost of losing one of these fine young men. I preferred dead, but I was not in charge.

The joke going around was this was truly the first episode of Star Wars and they were the real Jedi Knights, first on the frontline in defense of the Earth. For that they were excited. I knew, as they did, this feeling would evaporate in the first few seconds of the upcoming firefight.

Bellamy had us glued to him by two of his personal bodyguards. Their job was to make sure that neither Jack nor I tried to infiltrate the striker unit. They were successful in their task. Bellamy was talking on the satellite uplink that'd been set up in the courtyard as the tanker trucks started to pull in. Huge units that looked like they normally handled five thousand gallons of high-test aviation fuel. Three of them were positioned above three newly added fixtures that connected directly into the ventilator system.

We had re-worked this system over and over until we were sure that "they" couldn't stop the Florin from filling every spot in the levels from three down. It was going to be like an acid bath. Bellamy had brought an older Navy chaplain with him, who was walking among the troops offering up support and help for those needing it. Most of his time was

spent joking and laughing with the men. These fellows had made their own kind of peace with the work they had ahead of them.

"Got it Harv." Bellamy put down the phone. He turned to me. "Any last thoughts or suggestions before this starts. Have we missed anything?" "I can't think of anything else. We've run this through the computer so many times I feel like we have four levels of overkill. I just wonder if there is going to be anyone left down there for us to save." For some reason my thoughts were always going back to the hostages, or victims, caged down there.

"It may sound cold on my part, but that has to be a secondary issue, Ted." Bellamy looked at me and I understood what he meant. He didn't like it any more than I did, but that was the cost of war, and we both knew that anyone we managed to save after spending this long at the none too tender mercies of these creatures was better off dead anyway.

Dr. Loppin walked up to us and nodded. "Good to see you, Dr. Humpfrey,"

It took a minute for me to realize who he was. "Yes sir. Glad to have you along." He returned to the medical team formed up to follow in the striker unit.

"Harv says we got everyone out of the area. Air space is closed. We're on Green. Secondary strikers are in the tube, waiting. Any comments?" Bellamy spoke into the com-link system attached to his helmet. No one had anything to say. It was Go Time.

"If there is nothing else, everyone take their places." His words shot through the groups and everyone moved very quickly. Jack checked his sidearm, took two deep breaths of fresh air and then lowered his glass facemask. I did the same and headed over to the staging area behind the Mappers. These guys were assigned to "mop up", or kill off, any stragglers found on the level as the strike team worked its way down toward the platform.

"Gentlemen," Bellamy paused for a moment. I was sure he was praying to whatever god he personally worshiped. "We are go! Hit it, Cliveson!" He actually yelled into the headset. The adrenalin was rushing through everyone's system by this time. The doors on the main level opened and the gas tankers started up the pumps as thousands of gallons of Florin gas poured into the prepared connectors. The officer in charge watched his gauges and then after two minutes of hard pumping, held up a thumb to Bellamy.

"You got saturation in the hole." Cliveson spoke on the ICU, the com-link all of us could hear. "We are completely dry topside."

"Mole One." The call sign of the guys in the tube, well below the surface. "Do you have signs of leakage?" Our biggest concern was that the stuff would flood through and out into the subway below the complex.

"Negative. All dry here. Monitors are still in the Green. Mole One out." Bellamy turned and made a slicing sign with his hand toward the front of the complex to the officer leading the striker unit.

"You are go!" Bellamy spoke a little quieter into his headset. "I repeat you are in go mode. Give'em hell!"

A mass of men in radiation suits, high intensity lamps and firearms rushed into the Dulce Mesa. It took three minutes before we heard the first concussions of grenades blowing open sealed doors on emergency staircases and the sound of small arms fire reverberating up the corridors.

Our headsets were filled with the sound of men fighting for their lives down there in the Hive.

"Yellow Level Three, clear!"

"Take out that one! Shit! Over there!"

"Door won't open."

"Blow it."

"Man down! Man down!"

"Fuck! What is that stuff they're firing at us?"

"Keep it under control people. Work the problem."

"Door Open."

"Green Level Four, is a mess. Got bodies all over hell and gone, skipper."

"Alvarez just took a hit! He's hiding behind that wall and flash firing." The sounds of explosives and gunfire were thunderous and all of us were moving closer to the entrance.

"Stay where you are, Ted." Bellamy came across on the separate channel right in my ear.

I raised my hand and bent down on one knee, waiting.

"Boss One, level is secure, but it's a mud bath in here. I am ankle deep in gore."

"Affirm, Striker Leader, secure and move." Bellamy picked up the handset yelling into it, but I couldn't tell what he was saying from where I was.

"Green-Level-Four secure! Blowing doors on Blue-Level-Five!"

"It's booby trapped! Johnson get ba ..." A louder detonation went off and smoke actually billowed out of the doorway.

"Talk to me people! Do I still have a Striker Team?" Bellamy was back on com.

"We're here, but we got two of ours KIA. I'm losing people fast, Boss, I need the moppers as back up, now!"

"Mopper Leader, you heard the man, provide fire support and suppression down there."

Twenty more men poured into the entrance at a run. I watched as rounds were being jacked into rifles.

"Boss One. Mole One!"

"Go Mole One."

"Lower Doors are blown. Not encountering resistance."

"Mole Two, hold that door at all costs. Repeat: ALL COSTS!"

"Got it Boss. They are in and moving fast."

"Mole One, straight up, no prisoners, I repeat NO PRISONERS!"

"Boss! Call Black Flag, Striker. We are coming up the bottom. So don't kill us!"

"Got it. Striker is on your six. Less enemy here. Most of them are dying or dead. We're cleaning up the hallway."

"O.D.M. to Boss One."

"Go!"

"Yellow Three is clear. I need the Med Team down here now if I am to save any of these guys. We don't have enough hands to stop the bleeding."

"Hold one, ODM. Striker, call a clear on three or four for triage."

"Make it three, I need to have Moppers on four to make sure nothing got through us."

"Lippon. On the triple! Make it happen on three, right now!"

"Boss One, we are moving, taking secondary fire squad for protection."

"Go Lippon, go!"

The medical team started to run, carrying heavy cases and battlefield surgical kits. Another group of Delta troops, about ten in all, ran ahead of them for protection.

"Holy Mother of God!"

"Keep it to yourself, Sanchez! Boss, we got vats with ... humans in them!"

"Condition?"

"They got tubes in their noses and mouths and they are looking at us. HOLY SHIT! I think they're still alive! AAAAA-EEEE!"

"Affirm, message noted. Maintain!"

"Boss, what are we supposed to do with them?"

"Leave'em! Ferret out the bad guys. I will get some folks down there when the place is clean."

"Affirmative. Striker is heading to seven."

My worst nightmares hadn't prepared me for this. The clean laboratory where we worked wasn't like this. This was also not the battlefield I'd imagined. I turned and watched Bellamy and he was on the handset again. That meant he was talking to Harv and they were trying to pull another rabbit out of a hat.

"Mole One to Boss." "Go."

"We are all bundled up here. We got fire coming from every side and I don't think it's the same suckers that you told us about."

"Repeat and clarify."

"We got maybe twenty shooters, above us! And they aren't Reptoids!"

"Call the target."

"Gray, small, leather skin, big heads, using a green plasma weapon. I got three men KIA and two damn near. I need some support or I will have to pull and head back down."

"Where are you Mole One?"

"Eight, bottom of the staircase. But this place is like a rabbit warren in here. We can't even try to clear this floor without additional people."

"Can you hold for *two*?"

"I will hold, Boss, to the last man if that is what you want, but I need some kinda horsepower! Our pop-guns aren't even phasing 'em and the Florin doesn't affect them at all! Somebody fucked up BAD with this plan!"

"Ditto on seven. We have back up in the hallway. The door is being held by maybe sixteen of those same things. Lights and .223 aren't making it."

"Hold striker."

"Mole Two, get your ass up there and lay down some suppressing fire to keep their heads down."

"Mole Two is moving."

"Ted!" The private com-link crackled on in my helmet.

"Boss?"

"I need some help here. We don't come up with a Hail Mary pass and we're going to have to nuke this place. And probably us included."

I heard the words but didn't believe it. I knew Bellamy would call down the thunder and rain if he needed to, and for that I was glad. I just didn't want all of us to go out this way. Think, Ted ...THINK, GOD DAM IT!

"Have we got a flamethrower?" I yelled.

"You can't use one of those in there. There's enough chemicals in that hole to light us up like the fourth of July."

"You got a better idea?"

Bellamy growled. "Cliveson! Get Dr. Humphrey's Team Four flame throwers."

"We got'em, Boss. I "

"Ted, Jack..." He was on the private com-link again. "I don't want to ask you to do this, but we are all getting nuked and heading straight to hell otherwise, and I will NOT let that happen! Not here, and not now! Jo'bergs got the baby until further notice. I can't move fast enough to help you, so what do you need?"

"Our guys here and one squad for fire suppression." I took the flamethrower and strapped it on and Jack took another one. We sprinted towards the doorway.

"Jamison! You keep those two alive or I will have your guts for garters!" Bellamy called out to one of his men running with us.

"Boss, they got to go through me first." Jamison said with a thick Scottish accent.

We were moving down the hallway and hit the stairs on the fly. The emergency stairwells were the bottlenecks in the facility. Two men abreast running down the stairs was the best we could do, and that took time. When we got to Yellow-Level-Three it was a mess. Seven or eight men were lying dead, torn to ribbons. Another ten were being treated by the Med Team under Lippon. I stopped for a moment and took in the scene.

"Lippon! Get 'ern out now!"

"Some of them we don't dare move."

"Take the ones you can and get your people out of here. I need your fire squad, now." We butted helmet faceplates and he looked into my eyes.

"I understand, sir."

"We are pulling out the walking wounded. I will stay with the others."

Someone started to complain to him on the com-link.

"That is a direct order from Boss *Two*! Now move your ass! Leave the packs and equipment and get the men out of here!"

I motioned for the fire squad and we hit Green-Level-Four with a fury. The place was a mess. The floor was like a lake of blood and viscera. There were thirty or thirty-five dead Visitors lying sprawled in convulsive positions over rails and surgical tables.

When we hit Blue-Level-Five we could hear the firefight going on below us. It sounded like swarming angry bees.

"Those must be the weapons they're using," Jack yelled above the noise. I didn't bother to answer.

"Striker, where are you?"

"Halfway toward the stairs on Violet-Level-Seven, holding. They ain't coming at us...yet! But we are all running low on rounds."

"Shit. Boss One?" I yelled in total desperation.

"Go Ted!"

"If you need time to initiate the Final Phase, start it now."

"Understood."

Jack hit the private com-link on his sleeve. "Does that mean what I think?"

"It does, buddy."

"Shirley will be really pissed about this, Ted."

"I know." I clicked back to normal comm.

"Ted..." A man's voice came crackling through my headset.

"Repeat! Repeat! Unreadable!" I yelled, moving my head to clear the signal.

"I didn't hear anything..." Jack yelled as we were running.

"Ted", the voice repeated, coming through the static, *"stop where you are."*

I held up my arm and everyone bumped and bounced into each other.

"Ted ...what's going on?"

"Boss Three, is there a problem?"

"Boss One." I yelled. "Call radio silence for ten seconds! "

"You heard the man! Take a breath. Hold it for ten."

"Ted ..." the ghostly voice said, *"the door to the right of you. Use it now, quickly! Tell the teams to duck and cover."*

I froze for a good count of three.

"Everyone! This is Boss Three. Duck and cover, I repeat duck and cover." I hit the door with my foot and led the team in finding a wall to get up against.

"Everyone hide your faces!"

"Three, this is One..."

An explosion of white light filled the hallway and a rushing sound of air being ripped out of the building. No one moved.

"One to any unitOne to Three....One to Mole One?"

"What the hell is happening?"

"They're all dead!"

"All of them? Look at that! Shit! What did he hit them with?"

"Can it, Sanchez."

"This is Boss One! I need a report now!"

"Boss One this is Three. Shut down Final Phase sequencing. Repeat: CANCEL FINAL PHASE!"

"Confirm?"

"Repeat: shut down final phase sequencing now. I'm investigating."

I dropped the flamethrower and jogged down the hall to the staircase and went straight down to Violet-Level-Seven. At the blast door on Seven there were sixteen dead aliens, ripped in half. We worked the doors open and went down the stairs to eight. Mole One and Two were still hiding in the small rooms that formed that floor. It was like a rabbit warren. All the alien defenders on the other side of the door were in the same condition as the ones I'd found on the floor above.

"Boss One, this is Boss Three."

"Go"

"The facility is sterile. I repeat the facility is sterile."

Bellamy's voice came across on the private com-link.

"You want to tell me exactly what you just did?"

"No, not right now. We got wounded and I need a survey team in here PDQ, 'cause I think we got a number running down here on us." I wasn't sure, but it felt that way.

"Confirmed!" Bellemy's displeasure was crystal clear.

"I need transport on the bottom, now!" I called out on the open com-line.

"Two cars running hot, fast and true. Two minutes."

"Boss, clear out everyone up there now! Everyone!"

"Survey was just getting ready to go in."

"Cancel that. Bug out! Everyone needs to move, now!"

"Ted, what the hell is going on?" Bellamy spoke into my headset.

"Trust me, George. This is my gut telling me something."

"Clear the area, rapidly. Move everyone out here now!" Bellamy barked an order.

"Mole One, Two, Striker and the rest of you," I said, "head down and get on that rail car and get the hell down the track two or three miles like your asses were on fire, then close the blast doors and hold."

"Striker, do it." Bellamy followed up.

The men were moving quickly down the stairs and out the bottom.

"Where are you going?" Jack looked at me.

"Lippon is still on two and he won't leave with those guys. I am going up to get him out."

"Not without me you ain't!" Jack was at my heels and as I turned I realized Jamison and his four men were right behind us as we took the stairs two at a time heading for Yellow-Level-Three.

We ran past the vats with humans in them, being boiled down and processed in some terrible and awful way.

"Come on! If we live we'll come back for them." I knew better.

"The top is clear!" Boss One called down.

"We are coming. Send a vehicle for transport."

"I'll be here Ted, waiting for you, you dumb bastard." Bellamy was in my ear again.

We got to Yellow-Three and Lippon was still working. One other doctor was right beside him. "How many can be carried out of here that will make it?" I looked hard at Lippon.

"These four and ...him." Lippon motioned to a tall, handsome blond man, his silvery blue jumpsuit in tatters and and blood and visera covering his face and clotted in his hair.

Lord Tugy.

Jack and I looked up at each other recognizing him at the same time. "I got Tugy!" Jack hoisted him into a fireman's carry and jogged toward the stairs.

"Jamison, make yourself useful! Grab one of those guys. The rest of you do the same." A moment of reluctance, not wanting to drop their weapons. "Move, goddamn it!" They all grabbed a man and carried them out.

I looked at Lippon and the other four mortally wounded men, just holding on. "Morphine, Doctor." I held out my hand to him.

"I can't do that, Dr. Humphrey. I live by a code."

"Nobody is asking you to violate that code. Give me the morphine and you two beat feet out of here." Lippon hesitated and handed me a plastic case filled with pre-loaded syringes. He looked at me for a moment with something between disbelief and respect in his eyes. "I am ordering you out of here, Doctor. ..NOW!" Both men jogged up the hallway toward the steps.

I knelt down next to the first man, looking at his face. They had taken his helmet off and he looked so young. He was unconscious, his breathing shallow. The lower half of his body was torn and hanging by a thread. They'd tied off all of the bleeding, but there was no way he would make it another fifteen minutes. As I knelt there beside him, I felt a soft, gentle hand on my shoulder. I looked up.

There, his framed in the light like a halo, stood Dr. Rufus T. Henry. I slid my visor up and turned off my com-link.

"Rufus! Thank God! Thank you! Thank you!" I looked up into his sad eyes.

"Couldn't let you get killed down here, now could I? That's not how the story ends, son. Someone had to show up with the cavalry in the nick of time. These pups will be all right with me. I'll take care of them." He took the plastic case from my hand.

"I need to..." Rufus raised his hand.

"You need to pick up that case, right there," he pointed down the hallway at a silver aluminum Haliburton case sitting on top of a medical crate, "and scoot your butt out of here. You heard me right clown there. This place gonna blow, sky high, in about two minutes. So you get to going. I will look after these fine brave young fellows."

I got to my feet and looked at him. He seemed older to me right now than he ever had before. I jogged over to the case and picked it up by the handles on both sides. It must have weighed over a hundred pounds, but the adrenaline pumping through my system must have made it seem lighter. Still I wondered how I was going to get out of here carrying this and running for my life.

Turning, I saw Rufus kneel down and give the first soldier an injection. He was praying and singing an old Negro spiritual Gospel song and patted each of the boys tenderly, then took the boy's faces in his hand

and then kissed each one on the forehead, and they smiled and cried as they embraced the long sleep of death.

"It will be alright, child. You'll see..." He was speaking in a kind, soft voice to each of them.

He looked up to see me standing there.

"Ted! Get out a here!" Rufus yelled and waved me away. "Do NOT let Tugy live! Somabitch will try ta kill ya first chance he gets! Now getcher ass going!"

I turned and ran for my life, never looking back. I hit the front entrance on a flat sprint, desperately clutching the heavy box, trying to hold it high by the handles as I ran, gasping for air and feeling like my heart was going to explode.

Bellamy was waiting behind the wheel of a Jeep with the engine revving. I heaved the crate into the back with both hands, jamming it between the front and rear passenger seats.

"GO! Get out of here now! RUN LIKE HELL!"

He ground it into gear and the Jeep leaped up on its hind wheels like a spooked horse as he gunned it. We went flying down the road, full of hairpin turns and switchbacks, which Bellamy handled with an almost occult skill, and headed clown to the little Apache town below us, where he'd set up a make shift camp around the Best Western Motel.

"Why are we running like the devil is after us?" Bellamy yelled over the sounds of the racing engine.

"Because he is!"

The pressure wave knocked us sideways off the road and into a ditch. Both of us were thrown out and landed in the soft soil under some trees. It had come out of a cave that may have been an old abandoned mineshaft, or blocked up volcanic flume. Something huge had happened down in the bowels of the Mesa. I hid my face as the explosion rolled over us. I couldn't hear a thing for several minutes. When I finally sat up I looked over at Bellamy, holding his limp, twisted arm at a bad akimbo angle. It was badly broken.

"That wasn't a whole bunch of fun," he moaned and I could barely hear him through the high-pitched whine in my ears.

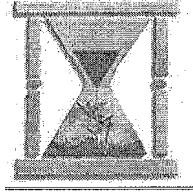
"Would have been worse up on top!" I yelled, still nearly deaf, pointing to the rising cloud drifting east with the wind.

"Was that a nuclear blast?" Bellamy tried to get to his feet as I helped him. I felt a stabbing pain in my back. Something was wrong.

"You okay?" He asked.

"No. But at least I'm alive. Let me see if I can get this thing running." I crawled into the Jeep and it started right up, but it took me ten minutes to roll it back and forth and get it out of the ditch. I finally pulled it up over the shoulder and onto the road. Bellamy got in. I patted the box in

the back for luck, and drove down the hill at a reasonable speed, the death knell of the Visitors still ringing happily in my ears.



CHAPTER 25

Jamison had stripped out of his rad suit and was already in fatigues organizing the camp. Everything that could be saved was already being set up and he was on the satellite radio talking to Harv when I pulled into the Best Western parking lot in the town of Dulce.

White smoke was rising up out of the crevices and fissures of the Dulce Mesa, which hung around the plateau at the top like a ghoulish shroud. .

Lippon was out of his suit and right on us, helping Bellamy out of the Jeep.

"I need a sling right now, Doc," Bellamy told him.

"I need x-rays of this arm and I need to set it in a cast, STAT!" Lippon pulled out a sling and draped it over Bellamy's head. Others rushed over to help, and Bellamy waved them off and staggered through them.

"In a while doc... not just yet." He let Lippon help him over to the satellite phone. He flipped a switch and threw it up on speaker so everyone could hear.

"Harv, are the boys in the tunnel alright?"

"Yes, sir! They're sitting down there eating Meals Ready for Ethiopia and playing dice," Harv chuckled. "Where you slacker goldbricks been?"

"You got landsats on this yet?" Bellamy was in no mood for jokes about MRE Army food.

"Got a spy in the sky looking at it as we speak. First estimate is total involvement," Harv got back to reality.

"Nuclear?"

"Negative. Repeat: Negatory. Recon says it was an implosion followed by an explosion of a conventional type. Totally gone! Just a big hole in the ground inside that cave is all the CPR flyboys can tell us right now. When it cools a bit we can send a ground team in."

What we could make out on the CPR was that inside the Mesa, the entire base was gone. I was just surprised the whole mountain hadn't collapsed in on itself, but it was all reinforced inside the main hanger dome to withstand a direct nuclear hit.

"Cover story: El Paso gas line just blew. That's the call then."

"Roger-copy. Affirmative," Harv answered back. "Already got a call into CNN."

"Clear." Bellamy started to hang up.

"Did the kid make it out okay?" Harv asked with genuine concern.

"The kid saved all of our butts. Again." Bellamy said, looking over at me proudly.

"Good! 'Cuz that bastard still owes me fifty bucks!" Everyone laughed and it released the pressure of the nightmare. Good Old Harvey. Bellamy hung up and sat down on a crate.

Jack helped me out of my Rad suit, which was good, because now I could hardly move. He was watching something else over by the hospital area, where people were working frantically on some soldiers.

"Tugy is alive, barely," Jack said quietly. "He wants to see the Boss."

"Help me up, Jack. I got a busted back." I told him.

"I'll get the physicians over here," Jack looked up and around.

"No. Not yet." I slung my arm around Jack's neck to walk and we headed over to Bellamy walking toward the medical tent.

"Jamison! I yelled and pointed to the silver Halibuton case in the back of the Jeep. "Guard that box with your life, man!"

"Sir. I need to..." He started to head toward Bellamy.

"You need to follow a direct order, mister!" I yelled again, glaring at him.

"Sir. Yes, sir!" Reluctantly he pulled his weapon and stood next to the Jeep.

"What is going on, Ted?" Jack asked.

I set my jaw, broke away from Jack and limped behind Bellamy as he walked into the Med Tent.

Tugy laid there sucking in air in huge gulps to breath and the doctor in attendance turned to us and shook his head. Bellamy walked over to the table and looked down at him.

"You have killed my world and all of its people!" Tugy gasped. "Do you know that?"

"Sorry, I'm just protecting mine." Bellamy looked tired.

"It was a fragile alliance," Tugy gasped, "but in return for... my help... with your kind," he contemptuously spit out the word, "they let us live ... in peace. Now, they will rape my planet completely. Why did you have to do it? We did nothing to you to... deserve this" he desperately sucked for air again.

"Maybe there are things they didn't tell you. Doesn't matter now. You trusted them and didn't trust us. You picked the wrong side to back Lord Tugy," Bellamy showed no remorse or care.

"They will come here," he wheezed, "and you won't be ready. We know all your plans and we have told them about all of it. They will come, but you won't be here to...see it...."

Tugy struggled to raise a silver pen-like device, aiming it at Bellamy.

"Gun!" Jack yelled, and in one fluid move he pulled his Colt .45 auto and crashed into Bellamy, knocking him to one side. A green beam lashed out of the device like an astral whip and hit Jack's right arm, ripping open the flesh. The gleaming silver Colt left his now nerve dead hand and flew high up into the air in small gyroscopic circles, as Jack spun and hit the floor in agony gripping his shattered arm.

Jack's weapon, literally, dropped right into my hands as I plucked it out of mid-air, as if someone had placed it there, with all the bounces going the way of the home team today. Like the walking dead, with every movement feeling like someone was taking a chainsaw to my lower back, I lurched forward, and stood over Tugy, glaring down at him over the baleful red dot of the sights of the Colt.

Panting and desperate, I saw the emotion of true fear on his face, something this space bastard probably had not felt in hundreds of years. Tugy raised his arm and pointed the thin silver laser directly at my face about 8 inches away, while I had the Colt leveled into his. His hand squeezed, then pulsed then jerked again. His arm, and his whole body, now spent, dropped back down weakly across his chest.

"Too bad it only has one shot...isn't it?"

Tugy's eyes darted around like a trapped wild animal, knowing his bluff had been called. He futilely dropped the device and weakly raised his shaking blood soaked hands. It looked like this was the first time in his miserable thousand-year life he had ever known real terror. With sheer strength of will, he raised himself into a sitting position, and stood up. His muscular frame swaying and shuddering like a shipwrecked galleon pounded by a storm. He raised his trembling arms above his head while his entire body shook from the strain.

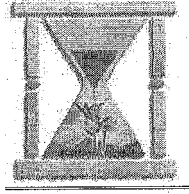
"I am unarmed and defenseless," he pled. But even as wounded and torn as he was, he still managed to conjure up that arrogance and superiority, speaking as if we were some Hominid sub-species.

"Under our treaty and accords, I am your...prisoner."

"When you see Simon Ratterman, tell him Ted Humphrey says hello!"

I pulled the trigger and kept pulling it until the clip was empty and still I kept pulling it, until the hammer clacked against the plate. Tugy's head was a Jackson Pollack smear of red and yellow ooze with no features left on his regal, noble handsome face. I convulsively kept squeezing until the pain in my back shot up into my skull with a brilliant flash.

Then the lights went out in a universe filled with stars.



CHAPTER 26

I had been lying there for a good hour, not moving, looking up at the ceiling. My counting obsession had me calculating the holes in the ceiling tiles again, then multiplying that by the complete number of tiles in the entire ceiling. I had done this before in my life and I was getting a little tired of being in hospitals. I felt the needle in my arm, but I didn't even want to try to use my legs. I was terrified they wouldn't work. Finally I decided to twitch a toe. It worked. Then I moved one foot and then the other. Raising my legs up into an arch was a little more difficult because of the pain in my lower back, so I didn't push it.

"When your estimate is over, you can raise your bed into a sitting position." Bellamy's voice was right in the room with me and didn't have any of the harsh mechanical sounds associated with a speaker.

"I didn't know if I had a broken back or not." I found the controls and pushed the button, until I was in a comfortable sitting position.

"Nothing so dramatic, Dame Judy. You pinched a nerve in the crash. Nothing even exciting, but I bet it hurt like a bitch. The saw bones here worked on you and they already gave you a clean bill of health. Why you were out so long is anyone's guess. I would chalk it up to stress myself." Bellamy was sitting in a chair next to the bed with a cast on his lower arm.

"You want to sign my cast and put your year of graduation?" He laughed.

"You're in one piece, besides the plaster appendage, I see." I looked at him sitting there, this battered hulk of a man. Between the facial scar, the stitched up cuts, the black and blue bruises and the cast, it looked like he had done 12 rounds with Muhammad Ali, then lost a fight with a blender.

"If it wasn't for Jack, we we'd all be singing in the Choir Celestial," he smiled painfully. "How are you feeling?"

"It's not the years, it's the miles. Beat up. Tired inside and out. Outside of that, not really sure of anything," I was being frank and honest.

"Understandable. That was a picture perfect exercise of a military operation," he added.

"What were the casualties?" I asked, concerned.

"We lost sixty-six men," he said, shaking his head. "But we achieved all our objectives, vanquished an implacable enemy and pulled out an unbelievable victory from the desperate jaws of defeat against impossible odds with a deck stacked against us. Like I said, picture perfect."

We sat in silence for a moment in honor of our 66 fallen comrades.

"What is today and how long have I been out?" I looked for my watch in the nightstand next to the bed.

"Four days. Total." He got up and helped me find it and slipped it on my wrist.

"There are bunches of unanswered questions, Ted. Mostly about how you know things and exactly how you turned a totally botched military maneuver and cluster fucked fecal blizzard of a defeat...into a win? Then, in a complex of that size, you just so happened to pull out the single box that contains everything we needed. And no one understands what happened to take out the Grays at the Violet-Level-Seven blast door." Bellamy sat back down.

A nurse came in and checked my pulse and blood pressure without saying a word. She tucked the pillow under my head a little more snugly to make me more comfortable and exited.

"It seems to me like we had lost the battle and you, single handedly, once again, pulled all our asses out of the ashes of total annihilation and the jaws of defeat, and ..." he threw up his hands in complete exasperation, "I can't explain to anyone what happened, so I have resorted to lying...again. 'It was all part of our perfect plan! We had certain knowledge about certain things that we cannot disclose, sir.' You know the standard BS we shovel up when we are totally in the dark." Bellamy got up and opened the curtains so I could look out at the lights of the buildings around us.

"Los Alamos?" I asked realizing it wasn't Groom Lake.

"Yeah, it was the closest triage center for everyone." He stood looking out the window. "Who was in there with you?" He still didn't turn back to face me.

"Why would you think there was someone in there?" I dodged it as best I could.

"Because, you might have turned off your Com unit, but your biometric sensors were still on and there was no way you could have made it from Yellow-Level-Three to where I was waiting in a minute and thirty seconds carrying a one hundred pound box." Bellamy turned and looked again at me questioningly with a hard glare. "Which means you were wrapped in some kind of time dilation field."

"Rufus Henry," I had no other option at this point than the truth.

"*Doctor* Rufus T. Henry?" Bellamy said with surprise, recognizing the name. "The black nuclear scientist from the University of Chicago?" Bellamy threw up his good arm in disgust. "He'd have to be a hundred years old if he's a day! My God! The man disappeared in the 1940s when he was well into his fifties."

I felt challenged by Bellamy's disbelief. "I didn't have to tell you the truth, you know. Get a set of photos of older black men, make it ten or twelve, hell, fifty, and put one of Dr. Henry in there, and see if I can pick him out."

"I already know you could," Bellamy shook his head, seemingly even more frustrated. "How long have you been seeing him?"

"Since Cal Tech. Only occasionally, but he always shows up at just the right time."

"The small design, for the scaled down time device? That was from him then, I presume, at Groom?" Bellamy sat back down and waited. "Yup."

I wasn't in much of a mood to continue this right now. I needed some time to clear my own head and figure out what was continuing to happen to me in this whole process.

"Jack? How is Jack?" I remember the final full moments before I passed out at Dulce.

"He saved my life. I would have been cut in two by Tugy if he hadn't jumped in front of me, but he paid a hell of a price for saving me." Bellamy looked at the floor for moment then looked up.

"Dead?"

"His left arm. The nerves were completely cut. The doc's stopped the bleeding, but there is no repairing the nerve damage. He's going to have a hanging arm for the rest of his life. He's contemplating having a prosthetic to replace the dead one. At least with a hook he could do a lot of things that there is no way he could now." Bellamy cursed under his breath.

"Better that, than you being lost." I made the obvious statement. "That doesn't make me sleep any better at night. I was unprepared and it's my job to expect the unexpected. I was responsible for deaths of sixty-six of the finest men this country has to offer, and for my friend Jack being crippled for life because...because I wanted to gloat over that smug alien bastard. I was stupid! That doesn't go down easy." Bellamy stared out the window into the stormy black vista of his own guilt.

I had finally had enough!

"Listen to me, George. What happened was the result of some spineless politicians years ago entering into an illegal and ill-advised treaty with the scum of the universe. That cavern is filled with the bones of hundreds of thousands of innocent people that don't know any of this!

People WE are sworn to PROTECT! All betrayed by a government that we are supposed to be working for! They all went through a hell of lot worse than any of us! If it had taken every single one of us dying, and ten thousand more, to do what we did, it would be well worth it in the long run! So, stop it with the self-pity sob sister bullshit and look around you! You just took on three different types of aliens and demonstrated you could kick their ass! That will send a message through the halls of power on dozens of worlds and send shockwaves through this galaxy that we are not to be *fucked with!* *That* is nothing to be taken lightly!"

"But I didn't do it. WE didn't do it!" Bellamy yelled. "You did it! You! You saved our butts in there. And I don't know how you did it! Or with what! That frightens me as much as Tugy and the Grays and his entire bunch. I don't know who you're working for anymore, Ted. Me? Us? Or them ... whoever *they* may be!"

I was stunned that this is what it had all come down to.

"So this is the thanks I get? Because it's not all about YOU?" I shouted back. "Then relieve me of my duties and put me out to pasture! I just don't fucking care anymore! If you are that concerned who I'm working for, why not just have me killed? Like you do to anyone else who stands in the way of you being the one and the only lord god fucking king of the universe of all of this crap!"

The yelling brought on the stabbing pain in my back.

Bellamy didn't say another word. He just turned and walked out. I laid back feeling the dull pounding in my lumbar region radiating through to my kidneys. Whatever the doctors had done to my back, they had screwed it up. I knew that now. I took the morphine injector on my IV drip and rolled the plastic wheel with my thumb and felt the warmth of the drug surge through my system.

I drifted into a dark place, filled with visions of Grays swimming in tubs of blood and vats of boiling screaming humans, looking at me with baleful pleading in their eyes.

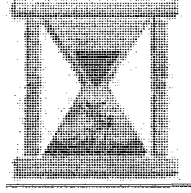
There was nothing I could have done to help them.

All I could offer them was vengeance.

PART FIVE

THE

LONE RANGER



CHAPTER 27

The days turned into weeks. One surgical procedure followed another and finally they were satisfied they'd found the small piece of metal that had somehow been overlooked in the two other surgeries. It'd been lying on my spine and flexing it caused muscle spasms in my lower back and legs. The recovery time was filled with reading popular magazines and books the nurses were kind enough to pick up for me at one of the local bookstores.

I'd given up trying to reach anyone by the second week, when, out of curiosity, I finally tried to call myself. I discovered all my calls were re-directed to some offensive little clerk who said he would take a message for me and direct it to the "Recipient".

After a month I came to the conclusion I was no longer the fair-haired boy of The Group and was now in a state of limbo. When I asked the nurses about Jack, she told me Major Thompson had been transferred to Bethesda Military Hospital where they were going to work on his new metal arm. That was the final indicator I was out of all of it. They'd clearly indicated that even Jack, my closest friend, could not see me to even say good-bye.

Well, at least he didn't stop by to shoot me.

I should've been angry, but in reality I was totally relieved. I'd spent the better part of nineteen years since getting my doctorate with these men and I had half a hunch I was now free to explore my own future. I wondered every day about Irina and Pasha, but realized very quickly if I were outside The Group, she'd be forbidden to see me as well. That hurt, but I could understand. At least she was out of Russia and would be able to take better care of my daughter and raise her in a country where she'd at least have heat in their home, plenty of food to eat and live in relative freedom. That would have to do as far as I was concerned.

* * * * *

Twelve weeks after I'd been brought into the hospital and after I'd been going through physical rehab and getting my sea legs back under me, I was allowed to walk the hallways on my floor. With the exception

of three nurses who worked different shifts and a security guard at the elevator, the floor was empty. So, I took up the habit of walking the two hallways and tried to complete what I calculated was two miles a day. I knew I was ready to check out and the attending physician told me it would only be a couple more days and he would release me. I didn't quite understand the delay, until, on a Thursday, as I was finishing my last circuit around the floor, I found a small, jerky little man sitting in my room with an open briefcase.

I walked in and sat down in the other chair and looked at the side of his face as he finished making some notes on a file.

"Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr.?" He asked when he looked up. "In the flesh," I smiled to no response.

"My name is Jenkins. I have some forms for you to sign." He handed me six NSA forms that were non-disclosures and a Protection of Secrets Act. He then handed me a pen. "You understand you may never talk about anything you have been involved with over your past period of government employment. You are restricted from writing any material that directly or indirectly provides any information as to what you have been working on while in the government's employ. You are further advised that any disclosures will result in immediate arrest and trial by military tribunal, followed by incarceration for the rest of your life in a maximum security facility."

"Do you know what I have been working on?" I held the papers and pen in my hand looking at him.

"I have no idea nor do I wish to discuss anything with you," he paused. "Dr. Humphrey, I am just a man who takes care of details for others. I can't tell you anything about any of this. I just know I need those papers signed and then I can explain the rest of what is in here," he held up a package in his hand.

I signed the forms, he counter-signed and put them into another file and sealed them.

"I have here a new bank account for you I opened with Wells Fargo Bank. It contains the proceeds of your salary for the period of time you worked for the government. Apparently, you were using expense account funds only during your tenure with whomever you worked for," he held up a hand to keep me from speaking. "Here is a new driver's license for you out of the state of Nevada. Two credit cards that will have the bills sent to this address, which is a post office box in Las Vegas. You are responsible for all charges on them after I give them to you. A new Social Security card and three hundred dollars in petty cash. Your personal Belongings from whatever facility you were working on have been placed in storage in Las Vegas. Here is the address and key to the locker. The bill on the storage unit has been paid for one year in advance. After that

time you are responsible for all charges if you wish to keep it. All identification cards, badges and keys have been collected out of your personal effects. I have brought with me one suitcase, that contains three changes of clothing for you and two suits with ties." He looked down his list and then added, "A new Ford sedan is parked in the visitors lot with Nevada plates. It is paid for in full. The registration is made out to your new mailing address. A simple insurance policy was arranged for one year and you may change that anytime you wish. You also now have a private medical insurance package that is paid for one year and after that time you are responsible for the maintenance of payments on it." He stopped. "Just like a new person, wouldn't you say?"

I glared at him as he handed me the package.

"You may stay in this facility for two additional days at government expense, but then you are required to leave these premises. You will need to be escorted off the facility by a member of the security staff, since all your governmental clearances have been canceled."

"Do you do this often?" I got up and looked down to see the suitcase sitting in the corner of the room.

"I have found it is best to keep these meetings to a minimum of outside conversation which is best for all involved. If you don't have any technical questions about the paperwork I will be leaving." He closed his briefcase and stood holding the handle with both hands.

"What would you suggest a forty-something physicist, who has just been dumped from secret government service, do with his life, Mr. Jenkins?" I felt a vile taste in my mouth.

"Forget." He said pushing his glasses up his officious little nose. "Go find a beach to lay on. Maybe in Mexico. Figure out that you are luckier than most. At least you've got a life of some kind. Good day, Dr. Humphrey. And good luck." He walked out and I could hear the short staccato clip-clop of his shoes as he walked down the hall.

I opened the suitcase and pulled out some slacks and a shirt. I loaded up the things I'd accumulated in the weeks I had been here and walked out in the hallway. The nurse looked up at me.

"Where do you think you are going?" She smiled at me, but had concern in her eyes.

"Home, Janet. I am no longer part of any of this. So, I can't see why I should stick around." I looked at the guard who had gotten up out of his chair. "If you call me an escort, I will be going now thank you."

She looked at the chart in front of her and noted what the doctor had written.

"Phil, will you escort Dr. Humphrey to his car, please?" She came around the nurse's station and took me by the arm walking with me

toward the elevator. "Jack told me to tell you when you got settled, he would get in touch ...if he could." She winked.

"Thanks. You are a doll for that." I hugged her and kissed her on the cheek.

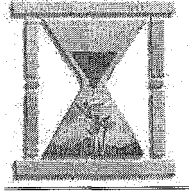
"Good luck, Ted. I hope it all works out well for you." She let go and stood back as I walked into the elevator and the guard pushed the down button.

"Thanks for giving me back my life, in more ways than one, Janet."
She blew me a kiss as the door closed and we started down.

The guard had put my suitcase in the trunk of the Ford and stood there for a moment. "Keep to the road with the yellow stripe. It will take you to the main gate. I will let them know you are exiting. Have a nice day, sir."

I drove off and out of the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Not really sure where I was heading, but I knew that it would be west. I finally got on the interstate and listened to the radio. It was already November of 1988 and the Vice President had just been elected President of the United States.

I laughed at the fact that I hadn't voted in, or even been aware of, a national election in years.



CHAPTER 28

After six months of visiting old sites and getting the rest of my 'paper' life put together, I found myself back in Barstow. I had driven up the canyon where I had grown up and nothing much had changed. There wasn't new construction going on here; like in most areas of the Southwest. Barstow was still a small desert crossroads where the center of town had grown, but the outlying areas were still just the same. I found the house we'd built when I was kid and it was all boarded up. After walking around it for a quarter of an hour, a car pulled up in front and a young man got out and walked up to where I was standing, looking at the old lab building.

"Hi. I am Jim Evers. I live up the road about a mile or so." He was half my age and had the sun tanned looked of a desert dweller.

"I hope I'm not trespassing passing on your property, Mr. Evers," I walked over to meet him.

"No, not at all. I'm a local real estate broker in town. Thought you might be interested in seeing this piece of property. It's got its own well, such as it is and ten acres running back up that canyon there...don't I know you?" He took off his sunglasses.

"I don't think we've ever met. I've been ... um ...out of the country for the last few years." This was my new story to explain why I didn't have much of a history behind me.

"I do know you!" He snapped his fingers. "You're Ted Humphrey! I thought I recognized you." He extended his hand.

"Well you got the name right, it's just that I don't think we've met, Mr. Evers." I was caught completely off guard.

"No, we haven't but I walked past your picture ever day I went to high school here. You were with the State Champions Barstow High Bulldogs in '57. Crashing full back." He laughed and it was genuine.

"Got me. Yes, I played right here in Barstow and that seems like ancient history," I turned and looked at the place again. "My dad and I built this place. It could use a little fixing up now."

"Well are you thinking about doing that?" Jim asked while looking around the grounds. He found the fallen down real estate sign and pushed it back into the ground.

"Is it for sale?" I asked not believing in the circumstances.

"Sure is. I'm the listing agent on it. The folks who own it finally had enough of fighting the desert and moved to Arizona to some retirement community. It's still too far out of town for most folks but I love it up here in the canyon. It's quiet and nobody bothers us. Oh now and then we get some dirt bikers coming over the back hills, but that's only on the occasional weekend," he went back and pulled a binder out of his car. "Let's see ... it is on the market for one-fifty, but I'm sure you can offer about one-thirty and they will take it. It's been on the market for about two years now with no nibbles."

"I will give them \$150,000. Right now." I had over two million dollars in Wells Fargo Bank in Las Vegas. It represented my thirty pieces of silver for betraying the pure faith of physics.

"Appliances and furniture all go with it. I have a couple of local gals who work for me. I'll have it cleaned up and the one broken window replaced. I put the boards over the windows to keep them from being broken out by local kids." He closed his book.

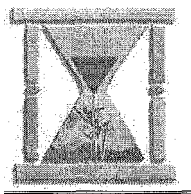
"Write up the paperwork and I will come by your office and find out where to have the money wired to. How soon can I have it?" I was really happy and I didn't know why.

"As soon as escrow closes and the money is in the account, it's yours. Maybe a week." He extended his hand again. "When you're moved in and comfortable, my wife and I will have you up to our place for dinner and some getting acquainted."

"Sounds good to me." I shook his hand and went back around the main building to look at the old lab as the man drove off to another appointment.

After stopping by his office and signing all the necessary papers, I told Jim I'd be back in a week and finish the closing documents. I needed the time to get all of my stuff boxed up in Las Vegas and have it moved out of my apartment.

I knew more about my father right now than I had ever imagined possible.



CHAPTER 29

It took three coats of heavy latex paint from Sears to cover the outside of the old house and lab, but when I was finished it actually looked new. I replaced the old warped wooded frames with new vinyl ones and new carpeting. A new high performance air-conditioner for both the house and the lab, made them wonderful year-round. I took over payments on a truck one of the Marines over at Twenty-Nine Palms couldn't make and used it for hauling and landscaping.

Within a couple months, I had the old homestead looking like what most Southern California homes in the desert should look like. White rock instead of a lawn, desert plants in pots all around the edge of the house. The driveway was now black topped and a new carport to keep the Ford and the truck out of the noonday sun that could pull the paint off of anything in weeks.

I had only encountered two rattlers while I was doing all of my work around the place and both of them were in the crawl space under the lab. I gently relocated them up the canyon. I went under there to make sure the hundred pounds of dynamite my dad had placed there was gone and not just boiling the nitroglycerin out of the clay and pooling in the bottom of the pit we'd built. Someone had taken care of that little task for me, which made me very grateful, to say the least. Not getting 'blowed up' is good.

The lab had been used for storage for all these years, and I actually came upon some old stuff left behind when my Uncle Bob had the place cleaned out. There wasn't anything of value, just a couple of old Allied Electronic catalogs and some vintage Life Magazines. I'd set them aside to look through at some point in the future.

I got every last speck of dust out of that lab, then painted it with high gloss enamel. Two new whiteboards, a set of cabinets, with a complete bench on the top, made a great place to work on electronics. I'd gone into L.A. a couple of times for special items and, during one of those trips, stopped by a large electronic supply house and picked up all the test equipment I thought I might need. I threw in a used Hallicrafters Short

Wave receiver to listen to news from all over the world and Coast to Coast AM with Art Bell for late nights in the lab. A small fireproof safe finished it off, bolted to the floor and walls, containing my father's notebooks, as well as my own. I'd spent a good six months putting my world back in order and I was just about ready to start on my new adventure.

During the fall, I'd started going clown to the high school and got back into jogging on the track. There were several middle aged guys doing the same, all fighting the battle of the bulge and a few of us would get together on Friday nights to watch the football team play when they were at home and then go to the local sports bar to have a beer or two as well as trading lies about how good we were when we played ball.

My new cover story was as a private research consultant working for an un-named company, working in the area of micro-circuitry for new personal computers.

No one asked further than that. I was respected as a professional and a man, what more could anyone ask out of life?

Jim Evers and his wife Alice became friends and she was always trying to fix me up with some charming local divorced gal with two kids or someone from their church that had a "really SUPER personality". But I'd become an expert at bobbing and weaving out of any of those challenges in life. After a few months, I think Alice decided I was a closet case gay and she stopped trying to find me a mate.

In December, after the last game of the high-school football season at the coolest part of the year, I started work on my project in earnest. If twenty-five years ago my dad could build a device that worked with what he had available and not all of the information that I had at hand, and actually accomplished his task, then I could not believe I couldn't replicate it. I wasn't sure what I planned to do with it. Maybe get future lottery numbers, find the right stock picks, or, pull a Marty McFly and buy a Sports Almanac. But the challenge was there, and I was up to it.

The one thing giving me pause was when Bellamy booted me out he'd let me keep all of my, and my father's, notebooks. I had no recourse to get them back if he hadn't, so it struck me as strange as to why he'd clone it. I traded it off as an oversight on someone else's part that had bagged up my place for me. Not knowing what they were or what they contained, they'd been tossed into a box and put in storage along with so many other things I probably shouldn't have.

I reduced the size of the device clown to less than a shoebox. It was all solid state but it was a bitch to wind the main and secondary coils, which had somewhere between thirty five to forty thousands winds of micro-thin magnetic wire. I bought a small lathe and a mill, the type folks used to build model steam engines. It took up only a small corner of the lab but I could fabricate items I couldn't possibly buy on the open market.

I'd found a portable military surplus generator in Tucson that I drove out and picked up, that put out ten kilowatts of power using diesel. Housed in a converted shipping container I painted to match the lab exterior it was equipped with its own air-conditioner and exhaust silencer. So, when I needed extra power in the lab I had it available without burning out the local electrical grid from the drain in cranking up the "Gadget", my nickname for the Time-Runner device I was building.

In February, eighteen months after I'd walked out of that Los Alamos hospital, I was ready for the first test of my Time Runner. It sat atop a chamber made of stainless steel, surrounded by a Faraday cage. I'd bought a large lead panel and attached it to rollers on the ceiling. After checking out everything around the device to make sure nothing would blow up, I prepared for the first trial run. I didn't know what to send into the future. So I picked up an old, faded Life Magazine, the July 17th, 1957 edition, still sitting in a stack on my desk, and put it in the chamber.

I'd brought the device up to working speed twice before. That was the reason I bought the lead shield. The first two times, my Geiger counter pegged into the red and I knew I was producing enough gamma rays to turn me into the Hulk, if I wasn't careful. This time it came up to a working level and the meter stayed silent, except for common background rads, behind the screen. I pushed the control all the way to the top of the range and saw the signature bright bluish-white flash I expected. The air was alive with ozone and I felt my hair stand straight up from the static electricity.

I waited five minutes after I shut down the device, waiting for it to cool before I even thought about opening the blast door on the chamber. I rolled the shield away and checked the unit for fried wires, burnt out circuits or anything else that would make me crazy. Everything looked fine. I put a thermograph on the chamber door and it was cool enough to open, so I unstrung the latch.

The Life magazine was gone. In its place was a buff colored envelope. I took it out and walked over to my desk and opened it. The handwriting was small, tight and masculine:

Nice Job Jed!

Though this might help you to align the unit better.

Also a little gift I got from an old friend.

You are ready now and I think he would want you to

Have it.

Rufus.

I sat back and looked at the sheets of paper. It was a scaled diagram and a schematic of a time unit, probably some kind of directional locator. It would allow a smaller Time Runner device to be tuned to a specific place in space as well as time, one of the things we had never been able to figure out, when we worked on reducing the size of the great beast at Montauk, all those years ago. No one at Groom Lake had been able to get the "Coordinator", as it was called, down to any kind of portable size. It still took up fifteen square feet of floor space, was seven feet high and weighed several tons. I marveled at the simplicity of Rufus's design and laughed out loud. He'd by-passed so much of the trivial and hit the heart of the matter, dead on. It made the Time Runner to where it could be portable. The Gadget could be thrown in the trunk of a car and carried anywhere, possibly reduced to fit in a backpack, or maybe, someday in the future, the size of a telephone pager you could just clip on your belt. Wow! Wouldn't that be something? The massive power input needed was the only problem I needed to work out now, and I didn't see that getting fixed anytime soon. But it had all worked, just like I said! And here I was, stripped, branded, blackballed and kicked out of the government, but still dealing with Dr. Rufus T. Henry, somewhere up or down the timeline.

I finally shuffled to the last page, which was a different size and much older than all the other leaves in the disheveled stack. It was a very old, yellowed, 5x8 sheet of personal stationary that had been torn off a notepad, the kind you keep on your desk for messages, doodles and various scribbles.

The bottom had a block printed line that read: "*Princeton University.*" The header had a more elegant, cursive typeface in gold leaf that said:

"From the desk of A.E."

Hmm ...didn't know anyone with those initials connected to Rufus. "A little gift I got from an old friend." Okay. Which old friend?

In the center of the note page was an equation:

$$S = -Mg C \int_a^b ds$$

I rubbed my jaw, trying to make heads or tails out of it. It obviously had to be important, or Rufus wouldn't have bothered to send it back through time. I went over to my desk, cleared it off, and rooted around through the piles and crates till I found a yellow legal pad and flipped over the used scribbled on pages to find some still blank way at the back.

Using the language of mathematics and physics, I needed to break this down into its elements and integers if I was ever going to make heads or tails out of it.

With the common and standardized notation used:

There is a negative reference in the formula in the Lagrangian function, because Ψ becomes the action integral instead of S .

In Lagrangian format, the equation would be seen as:

$$L = -|\psi| \int_a^b ds = -\frac{Mg}{c^2} \sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}$$

Therefore it can be assumed that the Mg particle, or mass/gravity can be seen more generally as Mi . Therefore I could assume that:

$$\Psi = -MgC$$

All the hair on my body prickled as an electric shock went through me as I stumbled backward, my breathing getting short, sharp and shallow. Stunned, the blood drained out of my face and a space opened at the back of my head. My mouth dropped open and I put my hands over it out of what I could not decipher was either sheer terror or unabashed wonder and amazement.

OH ...MY ...GOD!

How could I have been so dense? How could I have not seen this for what it was right away?

An old friend ...of Rufus?

The yellowed note pad stationary:

"Princeton University".

Who used to hold the CHAIR of Physics at Princeton?

The inscription with its gold leaf now seemed to glow on the page,

"From the desk of A.E."

A.E.

Albert Einstein!

This was the actual, original sheet of paper, taken from his desk, probably from right under his head, only moments after he had died.

Complete, elegant, simple, magnificent, and a work of sheer, shining, unadulterated, genius.

It made the whole universe make sense and come into clear view.

It was the Unified Field Theory!

The full and complete formula!

What $E=MC^2$ had done to unlock the secrets and powers of the atom, this equation would allow us to unlock the infinite power and mystery of the universe. We could fold space for faster than light speed travel or communicate with anything or anyone anywhere in the universe... *instantaneously!* Superluminal communication and travel would NOW be within our reach!

In fact, it made distance no factor at all, as it explained the underlying inter-dimensional interconnections of everything, everywhere. It was the mathematical expression of the face of GOD!

Oh, and, of course, unlimited travel backwards and forwards in time.

I wanted to send Rufus back a thank you note, but thought better of it. I didn't know where to begin. I needed to calm down and master the Coordinator problem first. With the Unified Field Theory in hand, it should now be child's play, which meant I could also locate where, and when, he, and my father, were in the time field. That, in and of itself, would be interesting.

History had been made here today. Future generations would look back on this moment as the day everything changed, if they were ever actually told about it. But I'd find a way for the world to know, somehow, someday. When I died, or just moved ahead in the time stream, I would get this story to one of those crazy researchers the government spent so much time smearing, then they could write a book to tell the whole story.

There was this psychic remote viewer who was also a TV and movie writer/director. He was always my favorite guest on Coast to Coast AM with Art Bell. Say what you want, Sean David Morton had some serious balls, and I couldn't believe no one had put a bullet in this guy, the way he messed around with Dulce and Area 51. They had to move the whole Groom operation to Utah because of him. But because he claimed to be "psychic", with some fantastically accurate predictions, he was easy to discredit by the "mainstream/government stooge media", so he didn't wind up dead. Smart! Yeah, he was crazy...like a fox!

He had nerves of steel and ice water in his veins, but could also tell a great joke and had a grounded sense of humor about himself and the world. I have never heard him lie or back down from anyone. At Five-One he'd been chased, shot at, threatened, harassed and he still kept coming back for more. They'd killed several of his friends who had gotten in too deep like Jim Keith, John Hadley and Danny Cassalero and he still kept at it. I even heard one General say once that they knew his dad and that he was "Too FUNNY TO KILL", which was the only thing keeping him alive.

Yeah. He would be the one.

All Sean would have to do was show this equation to a couple of top physicists and they would know right then and there this wasn't some bullshit made up story. That is only after they fainted ...or went nuts. The

applications for instantaneous superluminal communications anywhere in the universe and space/time travel would be limitless.

Of course, my story and this equation would probably get this poor kid dead, but that was a long time off. He'd just have to stay alive long enough to see that a book about all this made it to print, or better yet a movie! Or a TV series, like Star Trek or Gunsmoke. And even if they didn't knock him off, but that creates a big mess, with lots of moving parts and creates martyrs which nobody needs.

I know the rotten bastards in the government would probably smear him like no one had ever seen!! They'd just make something up or set him up. It's what I would do...if I still worked in the guts of the machine. But I was no longer beholden to "The Man."

I was the Lone Ranger, in my desert shack that had just cracked open all of time and space!

I pulled a celebratory beer from the small fridge in the lab I kept there for just such occasions, and popped the top.

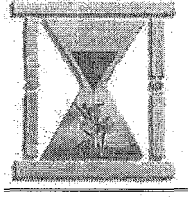
"Cheers to you, Uncle Albert! You finally figured out who God was... right before you met Him!"

I took a long swig.

I felt like a million bucks!

PART SIX

RETURN FROM
EXILE



CHAPTER 30

Saturday morning I was out front watering my plants when the black sedan pulled into my driveway. The windows were tinted to protect the interior from the desert heat and make it impossible to see who was sitting in the car. I continued to water, not really caring if somebody was lost up here in the canyon or not, when the back door opened and a heavy man struggled to get out of the back seat.

As I live and breathe, Dr. Harvey Glipsen had found me again.

I stood there non-plussed holding the hose and watching him huff and puff as he waddled his way up my driveway, working around the chain I had erected between two steel posts cemented into the ground.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph Ted!" He sweated out. "You might as well be on the back side of the goddamn moon. How in the hell did you find this place?" Harvey was almost out of breath wheezing like he was going to have a heart attack walking up a 10° incline. He was still sporting the same tweed jacket and dark slacks. His hair was thinner than I remembered and almost completely white.

"Yeah, grand to see you too, Harv. My dad and I built this place when I was a kid," I continued to water as he sidled up beside me doubling over with his hands on his knees. I moved so he wouldn't drip sweat on me.

"Oh cut all the polite crap! Of course it's good to see you, you dumb bastard!" He looked around and continued to shake his head out of pity or disgust, I wasn't sure which. "Do you have...a beer...maybe...in this place, or I would even settle for a cold drink of...water?"

I turned the hose on him. The water hit him square in the face. I left it there for a nice long while until he was good and soaked, as he flailed his arms and sputtered in shock. I moved it up and down, strolling in a circle around him, not wanting to miss a spot, and finally nonchalantly turned it back on my plants.

"Okay! Okay! I guess I deserved that!" He thought for a moment. "It did feel pretty good though. Ted! Please!"

"Are you asking to come into my home? The one that I paid for?" I couldn't help myself, the resentment was still there and I was ready to let the world know it.

"Look, if you want me to grovel and embarrass myself, I will, but can we at least do it inside like human beings, where I can get out of the sun? You think you owe me that much in life? Do I need to die of heat stroke to make you feel better?"

He stood there still spitting out water dripping down into his mouth from his wet hair and flattened drooping walrus moustache. Harv was Harv. He would never change. He was going to his grave being a jerk, but I found myself still liking him even after everything.

"Come on. But make sure whoever is in that car goes and gets out of the sun or we'll have a dead body on our hands by the time you finish a beer," I walked around to the front door and Harvey spoke into a small handheld unit and the black car headed down the canyon.

He walked in and looked around at my well-ordered home. "And I thought Groom Lake was a pit. This is worse! How do you stand it?" He picked out my favorite leather chair and plopped himself down in it with a wet squish, after dropping his dripping wet coat on my couch. "Cool in here, though. Nice if you like living in French Guiana. Got a whole Devil's Island kinda feel to it all. Dustin Hoffman your butler here Mr. McQueen?"

I let the *Pappion* movie reference slide and got a beer for him and a glass of iced tea for myself and came back in and sat down. I wondered what had brought him off the reservation to see the branded traitor to his cause. He downed the beer in two pulls and sat back.

"You should have nursed that one, 'cuz that's all you get. There's no government credit for servicemen or their bosses. You want more you pay... cash."

"Grumpy fart in your old age, aren't cha?" Harv groused, licking his lips.

"Not really big on social customs these days." I knew he had something on his mind but I wasn't ready to hear his pitch just yet." Last time you and I had a beer it cost me ten years of my life, and my career, with not even a kiss good-bye."

"Ah, there you go. Bitter too. After all the things I did for you? That's what I call ingratitude." I worked my jaw, thinking of something to say. He put on his reading glasses, pulled out his notebook and flipped the pages with his wet thumb. He made a satisfied grunt and handed me a picture. It was Irina and Pasha, dressed, posed, smiling and both beautiful. It'd been taken at a studio and they were leaning toward each other.

"That's a cheap fucking shot!" I tossed it back at him and it fluttered in the air, landing face up on the table. My language got worse around him as well, just bringing out the best in me, like he always did!

"Taken two weeks ago, in New York. She's growing up," he took off his glasses and sat back surveying me.

"What exactly do you want from me, Harv?" I put my tea down on a coaster and, in my head, considered throwing him out the front window for the fourth time.

"I can only imagine what you must feel about all of us, Ted." Harv started with his best voice reserved for Senators and the President. I had had enough. I snapped and grabbed him by shirt and lifted him up out of the chair pulling his face close to mine!

"NO, YOU FUCKING CANT!" I exploded. "You will NEVER know what I feel! Don't insult me by even thinking that!" I flared up with all the suppressed rage I'd built up over the last year and a half. "I did what was necessary! I accomplished every task asked of me and what did I get in return? A boot...up... my...ASS! Without as much as a 'thank you, man!' No! You do NOT know how I feel!"

I tossed him back down on the couch in a heap where the cushion deflated with a slow sqeeeee sound.

"Calm down, Teddy! Let's approach this like two old friends instead of you going off like some kind of raving lunatic." Harv was clearly shaken by my outburst and was trying to put himself back together.

"You walk in here and expect me to be civil?" I said pulling it back to a low boil. "You wouldn't even return my calls, when I'm in there having some saw bones cut around my spine, wondering if I'm ever going to walk again. Bellamy brands me a traitor to my country, my race and my PLANET! You hold my wife and daughter hostage and then I get..." I couldn't remember the guy's name that came to Los Alamos, "some pinhead bag boy who knows nothing about me or what I've done and hands me my walking papers. Don't think for one goddamn minute I plan to be civil, cordial or anything resembling it! You and Bellamy and the rest of you fucking monkeys can roast on a slowly turning spit in the fires of hell being fucked up the ass all day with the pointy dick of Lucifer himself, as far as I am concerned!"

Harv just took it. He winced at some of the words, then sat back looking at me. "Feel better now? Can we talk like reasonable people?"

Looking at him I wanted to laugh. Instead, I walked to the kitchen to buy myself some time and got him another beer. He had his back on the ropes that much was clear, otherwise he'd never be here. If I wanted to go on by myself, I could. But if I ever considered going back, this would be the time. The man was scared of something. If he was scared he was only the iceberg's tip, the point man for thousands of other people. Hell, whole

governments, scared shitless as well, otherwise Dr. Harvey Gilpsen (possibly the second most powerful man in the world) would never be submitting to my humiliations. My curiosity was eating me alive.

I walked back in and held out the beer. He grabbed at it like a drowning man at a rope, but I snatched it away. "Twenty-bucks!" I said as he sputtered. "My house, my rules, bubba!" He reached in his pocket and he put a hundred on the table. "Keep the change, you bastard." I put it in my pocket.

He put it down without opening it, glaring at me.

"Would it do any good to tell you I fought Bellamy tooth and nail about this? You are absolutely right about everything. His plan that he double-money-back- guaranteed people would work, blew up in his ugly face and he almost had a tragedy of epic proportions on his hands. You jump in, save the clay, kill the bad guys and pull out the goose that laid the golden egg to boot! Then, you go and save the dumb bastard's life, twice, and blow away that galactic prick Lord Tugy for good measure, in front of twenty witnesses!" Harv finally opened his beer, drained it, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and belched.

"To top it off, nobody knows what went through that Mesa like crap through a goose. It killed all those little gray sons of bitches and the evidence is blown sky high to boot. To this day, we don't know what happened, other than you seemed to know all about it and saved everyone's ass. So, Bellamy doesn't know who you are, what you are doing, who you're getting your information from or who you are really working for. He errs on the side of caution. Not the right decision. I knew it, Jack knew it, but Bellamy got to where he couldn't trust you. You've seen all of this before. Trust No ONE is the mantra! Paranoid people work in this business, and they're paranoid, as you know better than anyone on Earth, for a good god damn reason! He wasn't about to give you the keys to the kingdom and hand you the Jacobs Center at Fallon after all of this happened. In his twisty, squirmy little mind it would be like putting the coyote in charge of the sheep farm."

"Okay! So what?" I still wasn't convinced.

"Boy, you are working on being a hard case, aren't you?" Harv reached into his jacket and pulled out a buff colored envelope, still wet around the edges, and held it in his hands.

"Why should I?" I sat back crossing my arms in my own brand of defiance.

"Because we need you. Hell, I need you. Here is what happened while you've been out here in the dirt playing Rat Patrol. First," he counted on his sausage fingers, "the Visitors have been raising holy hell with us, using small raiding parties to come and go. There aren't enough of them to do a lot of damage but they're keeping the guys in Information

Suppression so busy they can't think straight. Sightings, encounters, abductions, just for the hell of it. They abducted a secretary to a prime minister two months ago and did an Ellen on her."

I winced at the thought of that happening to anyone.

"They did it, just to let us know they're pissed and playing hardball. "Second: they wiped out Tugy's home world, just like he told us they would.

Made an example of it. Complete destruction. Total genocide. The whole planet burnt to a cinder, and they're running their fleet at full tilt to get to us next. The timetable has been moved up by three to five years. Something about alignments with galactic center on December 21, 2012 and space tunnel being formed that will help them get here quicker, so we might be looking at going toe-toe by the end of that decade, although Dulce made them all re-think their entire game plan. Bought us several more years.

"Third: we can't get the device to work at all. Some little something in it we can't find. Irina is the only one with any ideas to make it dance, and she won't go any further without you being brought back from exile. Period. That is her condition.

"Fourth, and finally, this..." he fluttered the envelope at me. "This, my friend, is the shot to the head, for all of us. Five people have seen this. All of them know you are the only guy that can make that piece of shit in Fallon dance a jig, and they are raising high holy hell to know why the 'Hero of the Dulce Mesa', who we should have pinned a medal on, has been stripped of his stripes, branded a traitor and sent to fend for himself like Chuck Conners amongst the savages."

He flicked the envelope with his finger.

I could remain in my Elba to die alone, unloved and utterly crushed, or . . . take that envelope from him, get Irina and Pasha, and my whole life, all back, return from exile in St. Helena triumphant, and possibly, just possibly, save the entire bloody world.

I had lived to fight another day.

I grabbed the envelope and tore it open. I stared at it for a long hard minute as my jaw went slack. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

I held the July 17th 1957 edition of Life Magazine. But it was just the cover, as the innards had been torn out. The date was circled in red ink and someone had written across the cover:

Thought you might like to see this.

Ted sent it to me.

Really good photos of Marilyn Monroe in it. I'm keeping them.

Yours truly,

Dr. Rufus T. Henry.

I held it out in front of me and thought about the experiment two nights ago.

"When did you get this?" I asked quietly.

"Three months ago. Why? Don't tell me you just got this in the mail? The post office is bad, but not that bad."

"Two nights ago, I dug it out of an old box. Come on, let me show you my workshop," I got up and headed for the back door.

As Harv bent to pick up his still sopping wet jacket and a gun fell out of the side pocket with a load clatter. He quickly picked it up and stuffed it back into his coat.

"Is that in case I didn't want to play ball?"

"It's for snakes." Harv said indignantly. "I hate snakes...and the goddamn desert!" He walked out, puffing and shambling along like a train low on coal.

Inside the lab, he looked around and futzed with this and spun that, then sat on the metal lab stool. "Nice set up you got here. It must work, too. From the looks of that cover of Life," he fiddled with a knob on the oscilloscope.

"Bellamy must have loved that. He never believed me when I told him I'd talked to Dr. Henry," I added.

"Yeah, he told me... just before he tried to blow his brains out on a live transmission from the Caymans. Told me he'd been so wrong about you and that we should try to get you back," Harv never blinked when he said the words.

"Did he kill himself?" I asked.

"No. Jamison, that Scottish son of a bitch, stopped him. Wrestled the gun out of his hand then whacked him with it a couple of times for good measure. They tossed his ass in the hospital and found he'd been living on Benzedrine to keep him awake for months. Made him goofy as hell. He's back on the job and doing pretty good now. But now we have to baby-sit him 24/7. No one trusts him not to try it again. I don't think he will, but we need to make sure he doesn't up and decide to join the 'Choir Celestial,' as he is so often fond of saying." Harv walked over to the device and looked in the chamber.

"How do you direct it to where you want it to go?"

"That's what my old friend Dr. Henry just gave me the other night. Now all I'm working on is a power unit to make it man portable," I took some pride in showing off my brainchild.

"You want a big one to play with?" Harv sat back down on the stool.

"At Fallon?" I asked.

"Yup. That, and all the help you want. Whatta ya say, nephew?" Harv thought he had a done deal when he spit in his palm and put out his sweaty ham hock of a hand. I looked down at it, swaying in space.

"No." I said. His mouth came full open.

"No! Whaddaya mean NO? You can't say 'no' to this! This is your life we're talking about, here! You've spent years trying to make this work and I want to hand you the most well-funded, best staffed facility in the world, and you say 'No'?" Harv was beside himself.

"Why didn't Bellamy come and ask me himself? He's the one that caused all this trouble. And you're all just letting him get away with it!" I was still smarting and I was not ready to go back in the game just yet.

"Bellamy wasn't going to come out here and face you eye to eye after what he'd done. He watched you blow a man to pieces without a fucking twitch! He could see himself lying dead among the cactus in your front yard and you pissing on his corpse to boot. He may be crazy but he's not stupid. So he sends out old Harv. Hell, if you killed me, you'd just be putting me out of his misery. I've been jacking my jaw at that prick for eighteen months about how stupid he was that we lost you. Do you know how much fun it has been for me to stick that all the way up his ass and twist every day? Hell, I'd rather see you rot out here just for the entertainment value it provides me!"

Harv licked his lips and wiped his mouth again with the back of his hand. He opened my refrigerator and pulled out a beer.

"Hey!" I said with palm out.

"Screw you! A hundred bucks buys me five beers, ya cheap Jewey rat bastard!" He took a long swig. "Ah! Twenty-dollar beer!" He rubbed the cold can on his sweaty forehead and turned back to face me.

"Tell you what, Sunny Jim. Let me bring in the second string, see if they can make a difference, is that all right? As long as you promise me not to kill anybody else."

"I haven't hurt anyone in a long time, Harv and I don't plan to again."

"Just hold on." He pulled the little radio unit out of his pocket. "Morty? Ask them to come up to the 'lab'." He said the word with sarcastic disdain. "It's behind the main house...yeah, where the shitter should be!"

There was a click on the radio as Harv put it away. He finished the beer, crushed the can and dropped it on the floor. There was a soft knock on the door and I opened it expecting some science geeks that were going to paw through all my stuff. Jack Thompson was standing there, dressed in a suit. His left hand was a mechanical hook. He reached out and grabbed me in an embrace.

"Hello, Ted! So good to see you!" I held him at arms distance and looked into his eyes.

"You don't know how good it is to see you." I held the hook for a minute and looked at it.

"It's a little tough to type, so Harv got me a new secretary," he smiled and stepped in.

"What happened to Shirley?" I was closing the door.

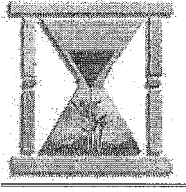
"Married her. Now she's home getting ready to have little Jack," he laughed and I beamed at his good fortune, as I shut the door. "I wouldn't close that just yet, Ted."

I opened the door back up and standing like a vision in a business suit, looking absolutely beautiful was Irina.

"Permission to come into your laboratory, Dr. Humphrey?" She said coyly and tilted her head.

"It's our laboratory! And you never have to ask permission, you know that!" I grabbed her and hugged her so hard it squeezed all the air out of her.

I never wanted to let her go again.



CHAPTER 31

The afternoon had been filled with old friends and lovers sharing everything that had gone on for years between us and around us. Irina sat next to me, holding my hand on occasion and regaling me with stories of Pasha and their lives in Russia. The ups and downs of it all. The way they were treated when in favor and the hardships of being held accountable for those things she had no way of controlling.

Harv sent Morty to get some Chinese takeout, since he didn't think it was a good idea for all of us to be seen together in Barstow at The Bun Boy. He had Morty pick up two cold twelve packs to make sure he restored to my world that which was mine. But there was no way he was getting his hundred bucks back.

Irina would get up and wander around the house looking at everything. She opened medicine cabinets, looked in closets, then sat and cried looking at her own picture on my desk and that of our daughter, when she was really young.

During a lull in the conversation when everyone was just about talked out, she leaned over to me. "I have grown older. I don't look like that picture anymore."

"I can't tell the difference myself," I hugged her.

"You are such a liar, but don't stop! It does my vanity good to hear that someone thinks I am still pretty." She blushed and swept her long hair back from her face.

"I won't ever lose you again. I'll bring down the thunder from heaven before that happens," I said with conviction and absolute belief.

"You have never lost me. You know that. We all make mistakes in life. Let us see if we can correct some of them. I tell Pasha every night about her father. The man that stood beside me fighting for our lives under fire and in the Atlantic Ocean and never flinched. She thinks that you are ten feet tall and kill dragons." Her accent would still come out when she talked fast. "She is going to be an artist when she is grown. She does beautiful watercolors and pastels. She did a charcoal for you. She

told me you would want it," Irina took a folded piece of paper from her purse and handed it to me.

I gently unfolded it and looked at the drawing of a man's face on the paper. I sat transfixed like I had been pole axed. I looked up first at Irina and then Harv.

"We didn't do it!" Harv was off the mark quicker than I thought he could be. "We never gave her anything like that."

"She tells me this is her grandfather. I don't remember the photo Kammler gave you at Mount Grace, but it has some of the same features." She tilted her head looking at it. I dug into my wallet and pulled out the old faded photograph and handed it to her. She sat looking at it and then looked up at me.

"She tells me he comes and talks to her at night sometimes in her dreams and tells her that her father is a great and wonderful man that she will be very proud of." She looked a little frightened.

It was a perfect likeness of my dad. I went over and took a frame out of the drawer of my desk I had been saving, placed the drawing in it and put it beside the picture of Irina and Pasha. I couldn't speak I was so choked up with emotion.

"Can I talk all of you into an experiment in my, tiny lab?" I was sure, but I needed to know something to help me make a decision in my life.

"Of course," Irina answered and looked at Harv who shrugged and Jack who stood up.

"Do you have another picture of Pasha with you?" I asked. She pulled out her wallet and handed me one that had been recently made in the photo studio in New York. We walked out to the lab and got everything set up. I gently placed the photo inside the chamber and slid the lead into place.

"This is going to hurt, isn't it?" Harv asked from the stool behind the lead shield.

"Not a bit, but keep your eyes closed, it gets bright." I started the generator and hit the relays. The flash was instantaneous and the room smelled of ozone. I shut everything down and waited five minutes before I popped the chamber open. In place of the studio photo, was now one of Irina and I with graying hair at the temples beaming proudly, posing in front of the circular 15th Century building called the Camera at the heart of Oxford University. Between us was Pasha in her Oxford college graduation gown. I flipped the picture over.

Teddy,

Your future is still my past!

Love,

DAD!

I had tears in my eyes as I handed it to Irina and Harv got himself and Jack another beer. "We're not just talking about science here folks. We are talking about a whole different level of understanding of things!" Harv: master of the understatement. Irina held the photo to her chest.

"Are you coming home to us, soon?" She asked softly.

"Am I wanted there?" I had to make sure this wasn't just one of those funny dreams that plagued me for the course of my life where she would start kissing me and I would wake up with a dog licking my face.

"You have always been wanted there. I have been waiting for two years to be re-united with you, Doctor Ted Humphrey, mister big shot! I will show the world I am smarter than all of you." She was actually mad, I could tell, and we all smiled at her bad English. "We broke our backs in Russia and couldn't get our device to work at all. When I come here, they are no better. They tell me to fix, but PIFFT! Is disaster! Bellamy gives me documents you gave him after Dulce. But I can't even understand them, they are so complex. He blow up what, five machines, Mister Harvey?" Her accent was getting worse the more beers she had.

"Six... but who's counting the millions of dollars for each one of them." Harv added with sarcasm.

"And you!" Irina slurred. "Out here in Bar-Stool. Playing at be-ink scientist. You hand me this as proof of your genius? I know you are smartest man alive. It just them, Harv and what's-his-name?" She was picking up Harvey's lines as well. I was sure that went over really well with Bellamy. One Humphrey would be enough for anyone, but two was unthinkable. "And you here? Twenty rubles of wire and solder and you make impossible thing work? What a waste! Come work with me, dab-link! Be da Boss of me day and night! I don't care! Show us how to do it, so this picture become reality and our child live," here eyes began to water as the Russian poet in her came to the surface, "in a free world... where no one fears the stars or the night sky and what comes in it!"

Bam! The fish hit the bait and it was all over. Hook, line and sinker. I looked at Harv and he nodded. "I need a week to finish up some things here and then I will be wherever it is that you want me to be." I thought about the Coordinator and wanted to still work on it.

"You got it. But since you are back on my payroll, you get a new set of shadows. I ain't losing you again, kiddo," Harv got up. "Well, it's time we three head back for that joke of a base called Twenty Nine Palms, outside Bar Stool, and get our backsides in da ocean and head back to Ja-kobs." Harv pulled on his coat and pulled out his radio. "Morty send the terrible twins in here."

Two tall blonde men in black suits and black sunglasses showed up at the door within seconds. "These here are the Bobsie Twins, Lincoln and Jefferson. They work directly for me and they are going to be smelling your arm pits until you're safe and secure at Jacob's Center. No arguments now." Harv held up his hand. "They can sleep on the couch, such as it is."

I objected to the intrusion. "Harv, I have been out here for a year and half alone. I don't think anyone is going to come in and drag me out in the middle of the night."

"Don't tell me, tell him," he pointed at Jack.

"Ted. It has to be this way. I'm responsible for all the security of the Group now and there is no way around it. What you showed me tonight here, is the proof I needed to see that we cannot let you fall into the wrong hands no matter how uncomfortable it may be." Jack said and then smiled at me.

"He always was better at being diplomatic," I acquiesced to the demand.

"Give him the stuff Lincoln," Harv barked at the first young man who pulled a portfolio from his pocket and handed it to me. A complete set of new identification cards and security passes. "Full run. Nothing off limits to you now. Boss Three is your call sign again."

"What happened to the last Boss Three that replaced me while I was gone?" I asked.

"I shot him, for asking too many questions. BWAA-HA-HA!" Harv broke out laughing, then regained control after seeing my face. "Oh, okay, I didn't shoot him, he just went nuts, like everyone does in this outfit. Didn't have the where-with-all for the long haul. He's sitting on a beach in Mexico counting sand dollars or something like that."

I turned to Irina and held her hands against my chest. "Will you be at Jacob's?"

"I will be at home there, waiting for you to come home to us," she reached up and kissed the side of my face.

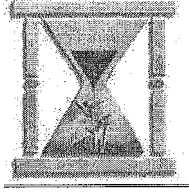
"Oh for Christ's sake cut the mushy stuff for right now. It is only going to be a week and then you two can play house for a couple of days and then get to work. Let's get out of here." Harv started to leave and then stopped and looked at me.

"Thank you, Dr. Humphrey. Thank you very much."

I nodded and escorted them down the driveway where Morty was waiting in the car for them. Lincoln and Jefferson were standing around looking at the ground for snakes, I was sure of that.

"Oh, by the way, rattlers are attracted to shiny patent leather, and they'll strike at anything the color black."

I grinned evilly and headed back inside.



CHAPTER 32

I had gone up during the following week to see Jim Evers to ask him to look after my place and I was willing to pay him for his time. He told me it wasn't necessary and he would be glad to do it, but wanted to know if everything was all right.

"Why, Jim? Like I said, I took a position where I need to be gone for several months at a time." I was curious why he would think something was wrong.

"Does it have to do with the visitors you had the other night?" He asked me in an off-handed way.

"What would make you think that? It's true, but I didn't think you watched my place that closely," I laughed, but the old paranoia was right there again, itching at my brain.

"It wasn't your place. It was the fact that the whole road was closed off, with Marine security guys who weren't letting anyone up the canyon, unless they lived here and then it was only with a military escort." He scratched his head under his often worn cowboy hat. "Alice just knew they were going to take you out in chains for being like a Ruskie or something. She reads too many spy novels. I figured you had, like, the President or Secretary of Defense up there."

"No such luck. Just some folks who like to protect their identities and work for the government," I thought the rumor mill had to be grinding this one through Barstow right about now.

"You going to work for them, Ted?" He asked then raised his hand to stop me from answering. "Never mind, none of my business. I will be glad to take care of the place. Anything special you need done?"

"Just don't let it run down. I will send you a check every month to have the garden kept up and the inside cleaned by one of your folks." I didn't need to go into any more details. I liked Jim and Alice and would have liked to stay in contact with them. I also wanted to keep the old place I had grown attached to again. I remembered how much I hated it when I was a kid and now it was the only place that still felt like home.

I gave him a check that he reluctantly took and we said our farewells.

At my place I'd packed up the device, all the journals, my dad's and mine. I had some of the stuff I thought I'd need immediately. Lincoln and I had the debate about moving it myself and I won. He wanted a security detail to take it to Jacobs but I refused. I put it all in the back of the pick-up and had Jefferson follow in the Ford with my clothes and personal effects loaded in it. We looked like a gypsy caravan. Both men were less than happy about the ten-hour drive up to Fallon, Nevada, but I was looking forward to it. Lincoln had lost the toss of the coin and had to ride with me. I would have preferred to drive alone, but that wasn't happening.

By the time we were on Nevada Highway 95 between Goldfield and Hawthorn I realized we had been traveling with company all the way. There were two chase and pace cars behind us that never varied in speed from what we were doing and one other up ahead of us that always kept just out of passing distance. As I went through Hawthorn, I got my first real impression of the seriousness of these men's intent to get me to Jacobs safely. The lead car put out a red light on the top of his car and slowed down to make sure I was on his bumper and the two following cars sped up with red lights flashing. Lincoln pulled down his sunglasses and looked over at me.

"Don't stop at the lights, just keep going right through them," he motioned.

"Little obvious aren't we?" I flicked back at him.

"Doesn't matter. We don't want to give anyone a standing target do we?" He emphasized his words well. They must have been privy to something that I wasn't told.

"You want to tell me about this?" I asked the first time and he was mute. "Let me put it differently: since I think I am one of your bosses now, tell me why so much firepower?" I drove right through town without letting up on the gas, following the lead car and noting the expression of folks' faces to see a military convoy racing through their berg, with two civilian cars in the middle.

"Oh," he sighed and pulled his glasses off and cleaned them.

"Out with it," I demanded.

"Two directors have been assassinated in recent weeks while off station. It wasn't random but meticulously planned professional hits. Somebody is trying to take out section chiefs all over the place. Another two just barely got away with their lives. Sao Paolo got hit the worst, and one in Johannesburg."

"That's why all the military around my place the other night?"

"That is it. Having Dr. Glipsen and Dr. Humphrey there was simply an unacceptable risk and the icing on the cake was the presence of Colonel Thompson." He looked in the rear view mirror to make sure

everything was in place as we moved back out into the open dun colored silver of the desert.

"Urn, remember, I'm Dr. Humphrey. I don't like being referred to in my presence in the third person." I said back to him, a bit offended he'd already forgotten my name.

"Oh not you, sir. The other Dr. Humphrey. The woman that is the Assistant Director at Jacobs," he said offhandedly.

"Irina?" I asked while watching the road carefully.

"Yes sir. Why? Is she related to you somehow?" He asked puzzled. I thought that someone was so paranoid they were hiding all the facts about everybody from everyone now.

"Yes. She's my wife. Or, ah, was my wife....well, is...but. ..." I tried to sort that one out for myself.

"That is strange. I thought she was a Russian defector that had just come over to us in the last couple of years," I was constantly moving and looking around.

"She is. But I knew her years ago and...well...married her." followed his eyes as an Air Force plane swept through the valley and circled above us. I saw two black helicopters in the distance coming straight at us. Somebody had the big black knob pushed to the firewall on those birds.

"Are these here because of us?" I asked craning my neck to watch the low flying choppers pass us and make wide turns in opposite directions to move alongside us. A loud panicked beeping blared from the device on Lincoln's waist. He picked it up and pushed a button.

"Cover One?" He called into it.

"Halo One here! FIND A HOLE! NOW!" The voices were yelling over the rotor blades in the background.

"Roger-Copy!" Lincoln hit another button and yelled into his set. "Scramble!" He pointed to a dirt road ahead on the right.

"Turn in there and head up that hill."

I didn't ask why. I already knew and the sweat was pouring down my back. Being stubborn this time might mean I wouldn't be there for Pasha's graduation. I conceded in my mind that my driving might have been a bad choice on my part. I turned onto the road and started to feel the bouncing on my lower back. I looked down and saw I was hitting sixty on the dirt road heading out into the desert.

"Turn left. LEFT!" Lincoln pulled his weapon and was yelling into his radio to the chase cars. They were following my dust cloud. The lead car had turned around on the highway and was now shoring up our rear.

"Head for those small hills over there! That old mine!" Lincoln was yelling at me over the thunderous sound the truck was making, hitting every pothole in the dirt and the washouts.

Suddenly, in the rear view mirror a brilliant light appeared from out of nowhere, heading right for us, getting larger and brighter. Then the light around the object faded. Sweet holy mother of CHRIST! I would know that dull burnished silver disk anywhere! It was the Sport Model, or something very much like it, screaming out of the sky chasing us down. I spun my head around, almost crashing the truck, to catch a glimpse to make sure I was actually seeing what I thought I was seeing, and there it was, looking like it had us in its sights. I was about to be killed by a goddamn UFO!

"This is SLASHER, I got a bogie at ten o'clock coming in hot, fast and straight. Can NOT, I repeat: can NOT fire THOR FOUR at it! Too low! Too low! NO JOY, NO JOY! Bogie is on the hard deck!"

That had to be the jet fighter above us. I learned years before that a Thor Four was a high altitude electromagnetic pulse weapon the Air Force developed to take out alien spacecraft once they were inside our atmosphere. Only problem was when fired below thirty thousand feet it fried every piece of electronic equipment on the ground in a directional beam for seventy miles.

I madly juked the truck from side to side, mostly out of sheer terror but also with the hope we'd make a harder target and raise a bigger cloud cover of dust. Lincoln yelled, being smashed against the interior every which way. I floored it as I slid into the turn on two wheels and skidded sideways almost rolling the truck toward the old rusty tin processing building in front of the mine. It covered the shaft someone built years ago looking for gold or silver, then going somewhere else to try their hand at striking it rich.

Leaping out, I grabbed the box with the journals and pointed to Lincoln to grab the one with the device. He reluctantly complied and we ran into the shaft entrance. Normally a really dumb thing to do, since most of them had a drop shaft just a few feet inside the entrance that could extend two or three hundred feet with a hard stop at the bottom. Like they say, it's not the fall that kills you.

Dropping the boxes next to the wall of the shaft, I moved back toward the entrance to see out. Lincoln pulled a spare small revolver from an ankle holster and tossed it to me.

"I think you know how to use one of those," he said, scanning the sky.

"Once or twice." I gripped it tight. I'd never wanted to use one again, but right now was not the time to split hairs about my preference and morals about killing people, or things, that wanted to kill me.

The other cars careened to a halt forming a semi-circle as the agents jumped out into defensive positions pointing their weapons over the vehicles. I watched as the helicopters came to hover some distance away. In a dazzling burst of light the evil Sport Model materialized and hovered

between them, the dull silver disk bouncing gently up and down on the earth's magnetic field like a balloon on a string. Ropes came out of the sides of the choppers and small black figures, that I realized were our armed and battle ready Delta Force troops, poured clown the lines, hitting the ground running, fanning out in all directions.

The choppers turned and opened fire on the saucer with everything they had, but the bullets and missiles just bounced off an ovoid shaped transparent force shield about twenty-feet out with sparks of pink and violet light. A green beam flicked out like a tongue of emerald fire and one of the choppers was sliced in two, exploding as it fell. The other chopper turned to run, but the implacable green beam slashed out slicing the chopper in a diagonal line from the rear wheels to the cockpit and it exploded in a white yellow ball of flame.

"Understand one thing, Doc!" Lincoln said as we watched in horror. "They cannot be allowed to get their hands on you. It's nothing personal."

"Whoa! How can you *killing me* not be personal?" I yelled.

I saw Jefferson running to get into the shaft with us. He was clearly under the same orders. I heard panic and yelling from outside, echoing clown the shaft.

The UFO was slowly, ominously, coming towards us.

The green ray ripped two of the vehicles wide open and the gas tanks exploded, scattering fuel all over the building and the other cars. One explosion was followed by another, then it cut my truck in half in a vertical line from the trailer hitch to the cab and the two pieces fell away from each other for a moment as if taking one last breath and then exploded as well. Those bastards!

The Interceptor fighter jet came in for a run. SLASHER opened up with rockets and conventional cannon fire that just exploded harmlessly with no better luck than the doomed helicopters. The beam lashed out at the jet, but missed as he pulled up and started to make another turn. The air was crackling alive with the cutting sound of the green ray getting closer to our position and everything around us was blowing up.

We were outmanned and certainly outgunned even though there were probably only three Grays in the craft. But something was wrong. The dull burnished silver skin of the disk began to glow a soft pulsing reel. It was faint at first but the reddish color deepened and the pulsing became more rapid, like an overworked heart, with each use of the green death ray. I racked my brain to remember the construction and schematics of the Sport Model scout ship we had back in the hanger at Five-One. They ran on a single small cone like engine that used a triangularly cut copper colored exotic material called Element 115. The element 115 was bombarded with an extra proton that produced Element 116, which, for

all intents and purposes, was anti-matter. The anti-matter was contained by a magnetic field and shot at a target gas at the base of the cone creating a 96% annihilation ratio. A cobalt-hydrogen bomb was only something like 6%. A bomb made out of Element 115 would take out all of Western and Eastern Europe and most of the top of Africa. That energy went into the three gravity wave amplifiers at the base of the ship. In Omicron mode, with only one pulsing amplifier, it floated on the Earth's magnetic field. Kick in all three and you could warp space to jump to where you wanted to go. But scout ships like this one certainly were not meant for combat. The power it used to get here from where ever it came from, and now the energy to the defensive force shield and then into this force beam was overloading and overheating the core engine, which was now showing as the reddish pulse in the gravity field around the ship.

Once I did the math and figured all the variables, it suddenly hit me: this was a suicide mission. They had no intention of ever returning home. Their only job was to make sure that I didn't make it to Jacobs. But they certainly wouldn't be landing and having a firefight with the Delta Force team on open ground when they could cut this mountain to pieces and bring it down around our heads. But it gave me an idea.

"Lincoln!" I yelled. "Give me your radio!" He hesitated and then handed it to me.

"SLASHER? This is Boss Three on the ground and in the hole, copy?" I yelled above the noise of the explosions outside.

"Got ya, Boss Three." The radio answered. "Those things have a force field I can't punch a hole through."

"SLASHER. Climb to forty-zero thousand feet using afterburners! Do a one-eighty and head straight down at them. At twenty-zero thousand, pulse the THOR and then pull out. ROGER THAT?" I waited.

"Roger-copy, sir, but that is a contravention of all P and P...sir!" God damned Policy and Procedures, the whole concept of the operations manual. It was the water I had just thrown out the window along with the proverbial baby. "Also, sir, it won't work at that range! I'd be too far away for it to have..."

"Look, this boogie is The Lone Ranger! It's out here all on its own with no backup or support! That thing is about to overload! It's a kamikaze on a suicide mission! We just need to give him a nudge. One more time, SLASHER! That is a direct order from Boss Three, on my personal responsibility and authority, roger?" Lincoln looked at me as if I was crazy, and he had every right to do so.

"Roger-Copy. On your order, sir," his voice filled with belief and conviction. "SLASHER on the rise, twenty seconds. Boys, hold the fort and throw away your Walkmans."

The green ray sliced into the rocks above us and tore tons of granite off the cliff and dropped it near the entrance to the shaft.

I roared into the radio: "Close your eyes, soldiers! Cover your ears and open your mouths. Lay flat, face down, AND DON'T FUCKING MOVE!" I turned to the two men next to me. "Get back into this shaft and against a wall." I was already running and avoiding obstacles. The radio burst alive with the sound of the screaming jet behind the pilot's voice.

"SLASHER is on the down leg run. PLOWING THE FIELD!"

The pulse hit the ground, literally, like Mjoliner, the hammer of the Norse god of thunder, The Mighty Thor. It felt like a force six earthquake inside the mine. All of us were knocked off our feet and loose rock and shale fell all around us. Lincoln and Jefferson threw themselves over me, pinning me to the ground.

Seconds later we heard a ripping crash outside followed by a muffled explosion. I laid there waiting to see the white light and the visions of dead relatives waiting to greet me in the after world. The angels never sang but the radio did come alive in my hand. We'd been protected from the EM pulse by the granite of the mineshaft.

"SLASHER here! That is a confirmed kill, I repeat: a confirmed kill. Sayonara suckers!" I got up and headed toward the entrance. Lincoln worked up ahead of me with his weapon pointed outward, looking for survivors. The combat team was already surrounding the downed Sport Model now sitting in two pieces on the ground, with a debris field as big as a football pitch. There were three small big-headed smoking bodies strewn into the wreckage like dolls torn apart by an angry child.

"Damage estimate, SLASHER from your vantage point." I asked.

"A bunch of dead alien sons of bitches if you ask me, Boss." I laughed at his response.

"In the area? In the valley? Damage report?" I called back to him

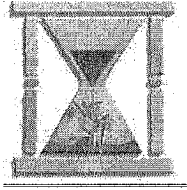
"Well the slot machines from Beatty to Carson City aren't going to be paying off since the main high tension electrical line going through the valley is vaporized along with the phone lines, so no one is going to be gossiping right now about this. The choppers are toast with what looks like no survivors." He clicked off.

"Call out a recovery team and cordon off the area. If you can find anyone's radio that still works. Then get more choppers with full fighter escorts to pick us up and get us to Fallon," I handed the unit back to Lincoln.

"You okay, Doc?" He looked at me, while he popped a piece of gum into his mouth to help clear the throbbing in his ears, then offered me some, which I gratefully took.

"I'm just tired of killing those little gray wads of scum," I walked out into the sunlight to survey the damage. The place looked like a battlefield. But we had won another one for the goods guys.

At least that's what I thought.



CHAPTER 33

The helicopter landed at Fallon Air Force Base, Nevada, about two hours after the battle. Lincoln, Jefferson and I got out covered with dirt and grime. They pulled my boxes out of the luggage bin and followed behind me. Harv was melting in the sun in his Ray Bans and tweed jacket, pouring sweat like a fountain.

"Can't just show up like normal people can we Dr. Humphrey? Have to make the grand dramatic entrance to the sound of a twenty-one gun salute? I thought we might sneak you onto the base and have you here for a day or two, before we made you a public figure to your co-workers, but noooo! You have to black out half of Nevada just to let everyone know you're coming?" Harv chuckled. "Can't say I've ever heard of that stunt being pulled before, or at least by nobody who lived to tell the hoary tale. All in all, I'd say it was a nice piece of handiwork, nephew."

"The aliens killed my truck Harv!"

"Ahhreally? I'll buy you a new one Teddy boy," Harv grinned. "Are you okay, after all this?"

"My back hurts like hell, I have a murderous headache and I don't want somebody around me with orders to blow my brains out, just in case!" I hooked a thumb at Lincoln standing right there.

"Oh. That. Well ..." Harv grimaced.

"Don't 'Well' me! That little item on the second page of today's agenda caught me just a bit off guard. I don't need this shit anymore, Harv! And as soon as I can get a new truck, I am out of here and back home and doing my own thing!" I wanted to see the re-action to this twist that I planned to put in the big cat's tail.

"I don't think that is called for. You just made page one of the Daily Bulletin and now you want to go back to Bar-Stool?" Harv looked questioningly at me while using Irina's new pronunciation of my hometown.

"Yup. I want to see Irina, make some plans of my own and I am gone. don't really need this kind of aggravation, from the folks that are supposed to be with me in all of this," I felt the anger working up in me again. I'd almost been fried once more and having someone more concerned with offing me than protecting me, was not my flavor of the month at all.

"How about coming inside, getting cleaned up and then we can talk about it. Holy heck, laddie buck, no one expected this to happen! Lincoln was just following orders. He doesn't have a lot of latitude when it comes to making decisions about The Group leaders, you of all people should understand that," Harv motioned to the facility. "Come on. At least get a shower and then we'll see Irina." I followed him reluctantly with my two new "friends" in tow, lugging my boxes.

I still had Lincoln's spare gun in my belt and I took it out and handed it back to him. I made sure he heard the whole conversation and wasn't at all pleased with any of it. I think he thought if I walked he was going to be blamed for it. I didn't really care.

* * * *

The shower felt good and the clean clothes were just a little too big for me because of the weight I'd lost those months in the hospital. But after the medic checked me out and gave me a clean bill of health, I walked out into the corridor to find Jefferson standing there.

"I was asked to show you to Conference Room C. If that is alright?" He was even more quiet than he'd been all week, which had been like a Sphinx.

"Lead on MacDuff. Lead on," I waved to him like an actor and followed behind him. The facility was completed and looked great. I noted the maps on the hallway walls that showed the movement of people around the facility, exactly as it had been in my "dream" two years before.

"It's shorter if we go this way," I stopped at a cross corridor. "Isn't it?"

"That is a non-public area..." Jefferson caught himself and then turned down the corridor. When we got to the glass entrance he stopped and turned to me.

"There is a procedure..."

I stepped around him and onto the spot on the floor raising my arms and spoke my name. The light came on and the doors slid open. I walked into Conference Room C. He followed me a minute later.

"How did you know that?" He asked in bewilderment.

"I designed the systems for this place." I knew that wasn't exactly true, but Bellamy had taken my notes and it looked like he had incorporated

every one of them into the final construction. All a self-fulfilling prophecy in metal, glass and stone.

Harv was sitting in one of the chairs and Bellamy was up on the big screen. I walked in and looked around. No Irina. I hesitated, clenched my jaw and shot Bellamy and Harv angry looks and turned to leave.

"Teddy. Hold on just a minute. Please!" Bellamy said from out of the TV. "I know there's a lot of ass kissing I should be doing right now. I hope it will suffice to say I was totally wrong and you were absolutely right. I am sorry for my actions and everything that happened and I deeply and humbly apologize and ask for your forgiveness. Jesus, Teddy! You don't know how sorry I am!"

I turned and faced the screen ready to launch into this mangled scar-faced bastard. Just who did he think...?

"Ted!" Harv pleaded. "Sit clown, kiddo! It won't hurt you to give us a few minutes. After that, if you want to go I'll have you flown back home to think things over. Nothing is going to change. Nobody is going to fire you or pull your clearances or..."

"Or kill me?" I barked.

"Or... kill you. We just need some time to sort all of this out," Harv was actually being nice for a change. I had a hard time with the sudden twist in demeanor.

I sat down and folded my hands on the table, gripping my knuckles white. Waiting.

"You've got to be a lot closer to the truth than we are, if they would attempt a daylight run at you like today," Bellamy said grimly. "That was a suicide mission. That craft was never getting back out of the atmosphere. It was using all of its energy in one desperate act, like a kamikaze," Bellamy waited a moment for the effect of his words to sink in.

"If they are that desperate to get to you, that means someone told them you hold the key to all of this that we've spent so long working on. I say this to you, with no hidden agenda and no deceit, as the God's honest truth: your life would not be worth a plug nickel if you went home now. Harv told me about Lincoln and his comment. I think he took his instructions a little too..." Bellamy grimaced "literally. But that's not the point. We both know that. I think you're just pissed to be back on the job and on day one you're a target and they have you in their crosshairs. But I also think it just proves you are that dangerous and what a major threat you are to them and ..." he paused with a long breath, "just how badly we... need you."

Bellamy rubbed his hand through his hair and looked back into the camera. "What do you need me to do? To get you to stay?"

Bingo! I had just drawn the card I was looking for and it was an ace high.

"Full disclosure. Everything. Not the stuff in the vault or some dripping here and dapple there. Everything. The whole game with all the players. The ones you are talking to privately, the ones Harv works with and whoever has been talking to Irina. All the cards on the table and I will offer up mine as well. Then we can see who's been playing us all for fools against each other and then maybe, just maybe, I'll stick around and finish the Gadget for you. No ifs, ands, or buts." I wanted it all. It would give me parity with anyone in the Black Op community. I would have the files that made them powerful and where all the bodies were buried.

Bellamy looked at me. He knew exactly what I'd said and what the implications were. There would be no one over me, no controls. No one could pull the pin on me unless they were ready to kill me, outright. Knowing that everyone builds a safe structure with enough valuable information hidden away in case of their untimely demise, that would all be leaked to the public, and having that kind of information, being the kind that can bring down governments, would make me untouchable, by any of them. Including Bellamy, and he knew it.

"I won't play if there is the slightest chance of a repeat of that little number you did on me eighteen months ago," I emphasized my point by hitting the table with my index finger.

"And in return, besides making the gadget work in the basement?" Bellamy wanted something and I think I knew what it was.

"Oh, how about something simple, like, say, a man portable system with a space/time locator and distance calculator," I said offhandedly.

"You got it already?" Bellamy couldn't believe it.

"All but the power supply," I sat back and waited.

"Harv? Did you know this?" He looked angrily over at Harvey who was drawing something on the palm of his hand with an ink pen.

"Yes I did." He never looked up, but extended his arm, admiring his artwork.

Bellamy sat back and sighed. "Done deal in my book then. Harvey, give Dr. Humphrey the keys to the kingdom."

Harv pulled up a briefcase from the floor and unlocked it. He took out a thin white card and slid it across the table. I picked it up. It didn't have any writing on it, only a key code strip on the back.

"Don't lose that!" Harv said. "Third floor, off limits to everyone. That key will get through the special elevator and into the room. It also opens all of the file cabinets. It's all there."

"Here is the deal. I want a week to use this," I held up the key and looked at Bellamy. "Then we we'll talk again. I want unlimited access to Irina and my daughter without any bugs or intercoms in their living area. I want two guys of my choosing to be with me. I tell you who they are

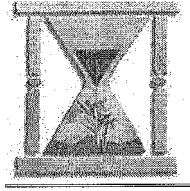
after I have reviewed personnel files. I won't leave the base, but I don't want to be bothered either, until I am ready."

I waited and Bellamy threw up his hands in capitulation. "We will live with it." He leaned forward and the screen went blank. He was angry, I knew that, but he needed me and I wanted to know a lot more right now than ever before.

"You know, kiddo, you've turned into a good poker player and a royal pain in the ass!" Harv got up and walked out, waving at me. "Good boy!"

I sat there for a few moments and took in two or three deep breaths. It was good to be home. I desperately wanted to see Irina, but that, for the moment, needed to wait.

Right now I had an appointment on the third floor of the Jacob's Research Center.



CHAPTER 34

I accomplished two major things over the next week, besides seeing Irina. We discussed our future plans and decided to take it easy and start seeing each other for dinner, and I would spend time with Pasha. She wasn't ready just to have me interjected into their well-ordered, and now stable, life. I couldn't blame her for that. I was well aware that we would get back together, but I, too, had several things that needed completing before I wanted to jump into being a full time husband and father again. There was just the fact that even though we loved each other, time had passed and patterns had been established and those would require some work to integrate between the two of us.

I had gone through the base's personnel files and selected several candidates for the position of escort, bodyguard and assistant. The final two were both bright young officers with advanced degrees and a willingness to work and learn from me, as well as handle all of those little nagging things that needed to be dealt with on a daily basis.

Lance Harden was from Montana, grew up on a ranch, before entering the Academy at Colorado Springs. He was tall, handsome and bright. He knew physics and was a perfect fit for the job.

Ralph Daniels was a Navy squid that had been a carrier based pilot and had advanced degrees in engineering. He came from Monterey, California where he still had family and was devoted to the work at The Jacobs Center.

After spending some time with them and finally deciding they would be perfect as my assistants, Jack Thompson sent them back to DC for a month of specialized training and indoctrination into their new roles. Knowing Jack, I figured he would scare the holy hell out them to make sure nothing happened to me, and have them operating at a level of fear that only someone like Jack could instill in people.

Now a full bird Colonel and the only man in the service with a hook instead of a prosthetic arm, he was often referred to behind his back as 'Lefty'. It wasn't going to be long after Harden and Daniels returned that I was sure I would be called "Poncho" to complete the dynamic duo, at

least when I wasn't within earshot. They already knew Jack and I were old friends and had been in the trenches together, so it only made sense that Poncho and Lefty would ride again.

I had the research staff set up a small lab on floor three for my own equipment and had the shielding put in place. I was the only one with the combination to the security lock and everyone knew very well that "The Doc's Lab" was off limits unless expressly invited.

After making my personnel selections, I began work in the new vault. It had only taken me a couple of hours to realize how much information I'd not been privy to. It was overwhelming. The vault at Five-One had been the tip of a huge black iceberg. I now knew it was all a decoy and Rafferty had been the bait in one of Bellamy's own schemes that had not come to fruition, since my minor addition spoiled his well-oiled plan. After reading most of the files on what he was trying to do, I still felt horrible Rafferty had been zapped in the crossfire. But without knowledge, we all make mistakes. It became obvious we were all stepping on each other's toes, wasting money and dearly precious time, because no one knew what waltz we were dancing or were if we were all even listening to the same tune.

After three days and nights of digging, I'd copied about two hundred critical political documents that, if released, would blow the roof off the whole business we were involved in. I carefully put these documents into a folder and hand wrote a small note that I attached to the cover with glue. It simply stated that if anything should happen to me these papers were to be leaked and used in any way the receiving party wanted to use them, but were only to be used in the case of my untimely death. I placed them into the chamber of my device and powered it up. I got the blue flash and when the unit cooled I opened it to find a note:

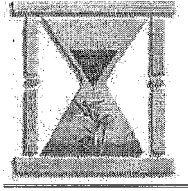
*Got the papers, Jed.
Will hold them until you instruct me
differently
Rufus*

I looked at the paper, from the future or the past, or just from a different world completely. I didn't really know if it would save my life or not. But I was feeling a little better in this game, hiding an ace up my sleeve.

The next few days were occupied with me reading everything that had gone on while I'd been on sabbatical from PROJECT: TEMPUS FUGIT. I noted several modifications had been made on the design I'd been given by Dr. Henry. All of them were reflected in the Russian's work on what they called the Chrono-Generator System. They were still trying to pound a square peg into a round hole. They couldn't see the mistake. So

I was going to have to change the directions of the entire staff, including Irina. That would mean I had to talk to Bellamy and Harv. This time, I decided I wanted to try to get this relationship back on an even keel.

It would be hard, but maybe we could get past it.



CHAPTER 35

It took a day to set up the video-conference between all of us. I wanted for it to be in a friendlier mood than the last time this happened, so I included Jack and asked Irina to come with me to the conference center. But she declined. She felt I needed to work through the political problems without her present. I agreed, reluctantly, and told her I needed to take over the operation if it was going to operate properly. She hadn't even flinched when I said it to her. Her only response was that this idea seemed to her to be the only logical one. I had already proven I could make a jump in time and that made me the ideal candidate for the position. She just wanted to be part of the team. I admired her love and loyalty even more than ever before.

The screens came up out of the cabinets and the monitors came online, with all three men looking into their respective cameras watching me.

"Ted." Bellamy acknowledged me first.

"How are you, George?" I asked with true concern.

"Doing pretty good for an old guy." He answered and gave me a half smile.

"Well, kiddo, did you find a good place to hide the key?" Harv smirked.

"I did Harv," I wasn't going to take the bait on this argument. I had more important things to do right now.

"Can you trust Dr. Henry?" Bellamy asked catching me completely off-guard.

"I believe I can. But I added a small caveat to my request with him." I figured they already knew I sent the file, since I'd designed the floor pressure monitor and they would know the one-pound package was gone from the facility.

"What would that be?" Bellamy raised an eyebrow.

"I included that the information was to be used if anything happened to any of us, you three as well as Irina and Pasha. That he should take whatever action he deemed appropriate." I waited, watching the reaction.

"You think someone might want to take all of us out, because you're back?" Harv had caught it the first time through.

"Makes sense, if they are playing two sides against the middle. If I was trying to divide our forces, I'd make sure none of us could trust each other. That would make it easy to divert our attention to more mundane things, like professional survival. This game has already cost us almost 2 years!" I'd been thinking about this for a long time, coming to the conclusion that this is what had happened once before.

"You just paid the premiums on all of our life insurance policies, didn't you?" Bellamy grinned a genuine smile, for a change.

"Hell, I thought you were trying a palace revolt to topple old Bellamy and me," Harv laughed and relaxed.

"I don't need, nor do I want, your jobs! I've been telling you that from Jump Street. In fact, mine is a lot easier if you guys handle what you two do so well, and let me just do the science," I sat back and looked at Jack, watching his monitors very carefully, but looked incredulous at my grand conspiracy theory.

"Who, Ted?" Jack finally put his frustration into words. "Who is this mythological, diabolical mastermind, playing us all against each other?"

"The same bastard that's been setting all of us up for years, leading us down dead ends to waste what precious little time we have left. The real villain of this entire story: Dr. Simon Ratterman."

"Ratterman?" Harv yelled. "Why do you think he's responsible?"

"'Cause he sold us all out a long time ago. He's been giving us false leads and partial information since I started with this program. Max was taken in by him, and I think Jacobs was tainted as well. Admiral Lawrence Jacobs was giving him everything we did. I think Dr. Bellamy can confirm this. Am I right, Boss?" I waited.

"Yes." It was a flat intonation without amplification.

"So it only makes sense. He was the one that wanted to waste our time, playing with the scout craft at Groom Lake. He wanted us to build the big time device that he knew would rip the place apart. Acting on information from Jacobs, Ratterman was the one that called in the additional help at Dulce which is why we got our asses kicked. Remember our seemingly indestructible little gray reptilian friends our bullets bounced off of? Ratterman was trying to protect the food storage and genetic material, while having us rid him of the Reptoids. It was only after someone came to our rescue and wiped out the base, that Bellemy had a visit from his special 'friend' who told him I was working for the other side. That's why he wanted me out of the program. Bellemy thought I'd sold you all out and was working for Ratterman. Am I right or am I right, George?" I sat back and looked at everyone. The man never moved a

muscle. He stared directly at me, unblinking, like some wax work horror, and I could feel the heat through the screen.

"How long have you known all of this?" He asked.

"That you were being played? Since a couple of months after you booted me out." I didn't have any feelings or emotion about it now. This was war. All just part of the deadly game. Bellamy did what anyone in his position would have done given the same circumstances.

"They wanted the box. The silver Halliburton case you gave to Jamison," Bellamy said sternly. "They said it would help them to... help us," he said, now seeing the irony. "They said it would be beneficial to us for them to 'review it.'"

I leaned forward intently and raised an eyebrow. "And...?"

"I didn't do it. It's under lock and key, right where you are and no one's opened it. I wasn't going to let anyone near it until I could talk to you. Things got out of hand. I believed you would ...eventually...come back to us and we could let you find out what was so important," Bellamy added.

"You told me that silver case was no big deal!" Harv was mad again.

"I lied. Then I lied to everyone. Including myself. I won't try to justify my actions, but I knew it was another link in the chain and I wasn't ready to look in the box either." Bellamy rubbed his face. "You find you can't trust anyone in this business," he snarled a sad bitter grin, "even yourself."

"We need to trust each other!" I said throwing up my hands in exasperation. "We've been through too much together not to. That's the reason I wanted full disclosure. It wasn't to get back at you, George, it was to protect all of us! We got very lucky at Dulce. Someone thinks I'm important enough to keep alive and I feel the same way about the three of you. So let's stop standing behind doors, and looking through keyholes and hiding and watching each other for some tell-tale sign of a conspiracy. We don't have the goddamn time for it!" I said pounding my fist on the table and then I sat back down again and realized this was the way of all power in the higher realms of government. Everyone trying to protect their own little fiefdoms.

"I agree, Ted," Jack added, as I knew he would.

"Of course, but shouldn't we find out what's in Pandora's silver box?" Harv was clearly upset by the latest information coming out of Bellamy.

"I'll take care of that, Harv. And provide all of you with an inventory and assessment as soon as I can." I offered up to smooth some wrinkles in Harv's ego.

"I agree." Bellamy sat there, then leaned closer to the camera. "Ted, I don't know what to say. With the fate of this planet hanging in the balance, I have been an insufferable, drooling idiot about all this. I take

full responsibility for wasting our valuable time and for that fiasco on the way here that almost got you killed."

"A simple conversation with someone, I would presume? Something to the effect that I would be coming here and taking over the project, again?" I asked very carefully.

"Yes. Then I was told, again, you were a traitor and this was not a good idea, since you were already compromised." Bellamy understood now how wrongly he'd been used, and it was still tormenting him inside.

"We made it through, that is all that matters." I felt differently, but this was not the time to approach that subject either. "But I think it'd be best if you considered taping or monitoring your meetings with whoever you are getting together with, because, personally, I don't think he wants us to succeed."

"I agree. I'll make arrangements, but somehow I don't feel he'll be coming back anytime in the near future," Bellamy sounded convinced, so I let it slide.

"What are we supposed to be doing now, Herr Director?" Harv asked me and sat back waiting.

"What?" I was puzzled.

"Well, since you're now the head honcho of Jacobs, I hope you've got a plan. Because I can't speak for anyone else, but I am fresh out of new ideas." Harv looked old and tired, hunched over in his rumpled tweed jacket.

"We build the same device and add the tuning module to it. That way we can test it without smoking off several million dollars worth of electronics that we already know won't work," I laughed to myself Reversal upon reversal, the answer to the universe.

"Okay," Harv continued, "when are you starting?"

"Already have. I gave the new plans to Irina last night and she's having a proper set of drawings put together so the guys in the Fab Lab can start, very soon." I'd done it without anyone's approval just to test the water and found that my new little boat floated very well.

"What do you need from us, Teddy?" Bellamy returned to his former, closer self. The hair on the back on my neck stood up, but I let it pass.

"Minimize the Groom Lake program at Area 51 while letting the public go crazy with it. Give some low level scientist some unimportant information and then let him leak it to the press. Then have someone fly the Sport Model and some of the other craft every Wednesday night or Thursday morning, which is when they test experimental aircraft anyway. Let those test pilots out there have some fun. Make sure people see it. Fly it low in the Kickapoo Valley down from Rachel so we don't have any trouble with the radar boys at Nellis. Then put it away and let it rust in the corner of the

hanger, I really don't care. That program is a money pit and

we need to focus our resources on the construction of the two other new sites. The new US Space Command Center under Kings Peak, in Utah, and the new facility in the Pacific Northwest. I thought an adjunct to the Bangor Submarine Base near Port Orchard, Washington would be the best. That way we can create a triangular grid for all three of the small devices to work from. It will create an interferometer with three long legs. When we combine all this with the HAARP system in Alaska, we should be able to pull enough direct power out of the Earth and the air to begin sealing the rips in the fabric of space/time they tore open with the Nazi Die Glocke and the Eldridge in '43.

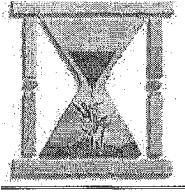
"By using three of them," I continued, knowing what George was thinking, "we can mitigate the need for using only one big unit. Much more effective and far less hazardous."

"Might just work, sonny boy," Harv chuckled looking up from his notes.

"That will take care of the problems we've created in the past, but what about a defense system? Don't we need the ships at Groom Lake for that aspect?" Bellamy looked up into the camera.

"No." I didn't offer up anything else. I already had the answer I needed, but this was not the time to share it. Besides, they would never have believed me anyway. No one said anything else about it. I had done a fancy shuffle of the deck and it was my deal.

They were all just waiting to see the next cards come off the top.



CHAPTER 36

The whole time I'd lived in Barstow I'd read all the popular UFO material I could lay my hands on. I subscribed to every magazine. I'd spent many an evening devouring every paperback, some that were reasonable and, most, that were so far out I just had to laugh. But through all of this I noticed a new trend of more sophisticated investigators showing up and writing about actual events we'd logged within The Group. These were serious, sober men, not like the crackpots writing about long haired women from Venus or the Pleiades giving them the elixir of life in some desert rendezvous, where they told them about the meaning of life and what it meant to be a member of the galactic community. The material was coming off the presses hard and fast and people increasingly believed the government was hiding things from them. I knew we had to redirect our efforts in this area to keep the general public off guard, all the while working desperately, in a race against time, to protect them. A couple of researchers really stood out in my mind and I wondered what was the best way of stopping them from getting too deep into our labyrinth of control.

I called Jack on the secure line and wanted to run a couple things past him. When he answered he seemed a little preoccupied.

"Are you free to talk?" I asked.

"Yeah, Ted, gimme a minute to finish up one item. I like those men you picked for your assistants. Level headed and hard workers. I think they'll do you right," he switched to speakerphone, since he was working with a minor problem, trying to hold a phone and write at the same time.

"Okay, I am all yours." He sounded chipper after he was done.

"I hope so. I like them and since I'm going to be spending a lot of time with them around I needed someone I could trust, since you decided to move up and make yourself a big shot." We laughed at that one.

"Listen, seriously now. Didn't we have some guys working for us a few years back that were going around frightening folks that were talking too much?" I couldn't remember the exact name of the sub-section they worked within.

"The Registry," he offered.

"That's it! I couldn't pull that one back. Do you still have them?" I hadn't heard about them in years now. "What do you call them now?" "Oh, buddy, I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," he laughed on the phone. "No, that is a joke. Yeah, we still got the department, but we haven't been using it much lately. We call it MIB now, after the stuff in Gary Baker's book a few years back. Men In Black." "I like that," I was playing with my ballpoint pen and it broke spreading ink all over my hands. I tried to wipe it off, but now I had the mark of the beast upon me.

"What do you want with them?" Jack got serious.

"I want to increase their usage, but in a different direction. I want to use them to compromise some folks. Give them the power to provide some heavy disinformation to a couple of these researchers. I'm sending you a list right now over the fax. Tell me when you have it."

I waited while I sent him the page I'd worked up.

"Got it. Wow! That is a list. Two professors, one independent film maker, a couple of scientists doing research into the subject, five writers and a remote viewer in Hermosa Beach. Nice place. Good surf. Okay, what do you want done, exactly?" Jack was onboard as always.

"Leak them some high level stuff. Make it come from high-ranking military types involved in special ops in advanced R and D areas. Rock solid backgrounds, provable if anyone looks really hard. Make it plausible that we've reverse engineered alien spacecraft and are testing them. Include the cattle mutilation stuff as well. Blame it on a secret project at White Sands or Nellis. Have them start some crazy rumors about HAARP as well. Make them believe we're going to use it to heat up the atmosphere to alter weather patterns over China or something to cause floods, storms, anything like that." I waited for his response. There was a pause as, I knew, he was taking notes.

"Got it. When do we start on this?" He asked without questioning me.

"Yesterday would be fine," I laughed, still wiping ink off my hands.

"Disinformation, then what? Discredit their disclosures?" "Exactly.

Anybody on that list you think we could buy off to get to work for us inside their community?" I had a couple of hunches but I wanted to hear his comments.

"Two of them. Number 3 and 7," I looked down my list as well.

"I would agree. They've got arguments going with others in the field, so they'd be prime to be given inside information and have the last laugh on those they want to show don't know what they're talking about. Get a hold of someone over in Intel at Langley. It's always better coming from those guys. God knows those bastards can screw up a wet dream." I'd had dealings with them in the past and knew they'd jump at the chance to

work closer to The Group, thinking they might be able to infiltrate and use us for their own ways and means. But there was no chance of that ever happening.

"Sure, that's not a problem. I got a couple of favors owed to me over there and I will call in the markers right now," Jack acted like I was ordering a pizza, when I knew I was actually ruining people's careers and lives. But it was necessary.

"Also, you remember MK Ultra? The mind control stuff?"

"Sure. About ten years ago we gave up on a lot of that when funding dried up," Jack was amazing to pull these facts off the top of his head.

"Have a collection of bright guys get together and re-write the manuals. Bring it up to date with the latest university research, then leak it, as though it's really going on right now. Make people believe their encounters with the 'Visitors' are really nothing more than the government screwing with their heads, with some kind of new ray gun or something." I wasn't sure of the right words but I had always liked the idea of "ray guns", and it always made me laugh we actually had a US President named Ray Gun who had financed so much of our program.

"I think we can do a little better than that, Ted. But let me put some stuff on paper for your review. Anything else?"

"Nope. Hit that one hard. Get someone in the Air Force to write up some bogus report that explains away that Roswell crap, will you? The dumber the better." I had been seeing more and more books come out about the crash at Roswell and some writers were getting really close to the truth.

"So the MIBs are back in business. Good! This should be fun!" Jack was always trying to find the bright spots in the gloom.

"How is Harv doing?" I asked quietly.

"Not good," Jack wasn't filling in many blanks for me.

"Health?" I knew something was wrong, but not sure what.

"No, I don't think so. I think he's concerned you've been given too much power and that his days are numbered. He's spending a lot of time trying to make more contacts than he should, all of them powerful and very misdirected in their views of what's important," Jack never said it any way but straight which was one of the things I always like about him.

"What can I do to help him?" I closed my eyes listening very carefully. I owed a lot to Harv, and now would be the right time to start paying him back for all of his support over the years we had worked together.

"Let him in." Jack said quietly. "Tell him what you're thinking. Make him feel like he's still part of your world. If I'm way out of line here Ted, tell me to shut up and I will."

"Don't pull any punches, Jack. You never do, so don't start now." I could see him in my mind, stewing over this. He was never one to interfere in people's lives if he could help it, but he knew something that I needed to know about Harv. I had to find a way to make the horses all go in the same direction.

"He went crazy over what Bellamy did to you. None of us liked it, but Harv almost got himself killed over it. Bellamy is a ruthless bastard, who'd just as soon kill you as spit on you, and Harv was crossing the line every day, shoving George's nose in the shit. So, when you came back and forced their hand, Harv felt like you just pushed past him and shoved him down in the mud. You came across like you didn't need him anymore."

Jack stopped, thinking he had said too much.

"Jack, I have to make this work between all of us. I need your opinion and your advice. That's an order soldier," I said quietly.

"Ted, without *this*, what he does, his job... he's got nothing. And it's a thankless job he can't ever tell anyone about...ever. We have wives and kids and families and things that give what we do some purpose and meaning. He has nobody but us. We're the only family he has. There's no one home at night waiting for Harv. He lives in a small, cold flat, where he just drinks himself to sleep when he does go home, which is hardly ever. He's a stupendously brilliant man, and we sometimes forget how incredible he is under the jokes and bravado and bluster. He doesn't want much, Teddy, just to be part of the team and to feel like he's contributing. Like he has a purpose again, which is all anyone ever really wants out of life, isn't it?"

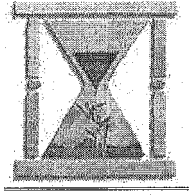
"Jack."

"Yes sir?"

"Thank you. Let me know when you start the new disinformation program."

I hung up and headed clown the hallway for the men's room. The spilled ink all over me made me look like I'd been in a knife fight with some cobalt-based alien life form.

And now I needed to wash the blood off my hands.



CHAPTER 37

I'd planned to have dinner with Irina and Pasha but canceled at the last minute. She understood and let me off the hook, gently, after a minor rebuke. I needed some alone time and I had to get out of the facility for a while. I needed to see the night sky. I checked in with security and told them I needed a car, a driver and one security officer. They were waiting for me at the entrance to the medical part of the building. I got in the back seat and told them to drive me out to Dixie Valley, approximately thirty miles east of the base on Highway Fifty, *'The loneliest stretch of road in the State'*, as it is known in Nevada.

Dixie Valley is the top end of the Naval practice bombing range. Each night one could see jets screaming out of the sky and blow up a whole black city at the bottom of the valley. I hadn't been through this country in years, but I remembered this part from one of my trips years before.

When we got there I had them stop the car and I got out to look up at the night sky and the billions and billions of stars above me. The air was crisp and clear and I could have spent the rest of my life just standing there.

After about ten minutes the security man walked up and asked if everything was all right. I smiled and nodded, asked him to go back to the car, and went back to watching the blinking of the stars out there in space, where someone had told someone else there was a war going on. It was hard to imagine, from this small patch of desert ground, that there was anything else out there but us.

That was the lie I wanted us to start telling people and try to make them believe it. I'd convinced myself it was for the right reason, but I still wasn't sure, that I had the right to ruin people's lives. I had the power, but the reason came from a different part of me. I had started out to learn about physics. Now, I was masterminding a defense system that would meet an enemy that was like nothing the human race had ever faced before. I had seen it up close and personal at Dulce, but it didn't lessen

the feelings within me that I was manipulating people to do my bidding and I wasn't sure I was the right man for the job.

"Awful pretty, ain't it?" said the voice behind me.

"Sure is, but won't those guys in the car be concerned you're here?" I never turned around to see the man. I knew him only too well. Dr. Rufus T. Henry had become a close part of my world, even though, at times, I thought I'd become schizophrenic and he was nothing more than a voice in my own head I'd created to justify my own actions.

"Nah, they're taking a little nap, right now," he walked up next to me and pointed to the starry sky. "I've been up there on a small planet circling that yellow sun. It's a binary star, with two of them. The planet is a nice place with lots of green foliage and crystal clear water. There's a small group of human-like people living there. They use their minds to do all kinds of wonderful things. They have advanced far beyond us, but they haven't depended on technology. They think it and it is there," he chuckled. "I really, really like 'em. They're like the pixies my mama used to tell me stories about when I was a kid."

"I..." starting a sentence that way seemed inappropriate when dealing with this particular friend. "We... me... and you... guys, have made it possible to defend this world of ours. But defenders must only survive. I need something offensive. I need to be able to neutralize their ships coming into our atmosphere or a little farther out would be better."

"Yeap," he didn't say anything else. He just stood there looking at the sky with me.

"Do you grow older, or do you stay the same age?" I turned and looked at him in the darkness.

"I am that I am. Time doesn't have much hold on me much anymore. I move around and learn things. I've had some help from some kindly folks who have done physical things for me. I have some new organs and my sight is better than I had as a kid. I'll die one of these days when this business is over and done, but that's no big deal. The part of me that is non-physical will just keep going on. You know what I mean?" He laughed.

"No, I don't. I haven't spent much time thinking about the life after this one. This one's been hard enough to deal with for me," I felt older. Infinitely older.

"Not to worry. It's all the way it should be," he moved a little toward me. "I got something for you. But you might be wanting to show it to Mr. Harvey first before anyone else sees it."

I took the file from him and tucked it under my arm.

"You been listening to my conversations again, Rufus?" I smiled to myself.

"I been doin' that, now and again. But it's just to make the road a little smoother for you, Ted. I'm just here as an errand boy for somebody else I think you know," he laughed again.

"Why doesn't he just come see me?" I asked feeling the pangs of loneliness and abandonment inside.

"He's got him a powerful lot of work to do. He is 24/7 at it. 'Cause he knows you need him to be about what he does. I do what I do, and you need to do what you do. That way, all of us are working just like a close-knit family on the farm. Don't worry, son. He's there, and you'll see him when it's time. He promised you that." I felt, more than saw, him move back into the shadows behind me. "Now you be getting back home, Dr. Ted. These boys will be waking up soon now."

I turned and he was gone. I held the file and looked back into the night sky, wondering if I would ever be able to stand on that distant planet where people use their minds to make what they need. It was a nice thought and I made a wish on the star I thought it was.

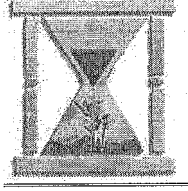
"Dr. Humphrey! Are you all right?" The security man ran up next to me, probably feeling pretty guilty and stupid for having fallen asleep in the car. "We've been out here a couple of hours, even though it doesn't feel like it, but I think we should be heading back, don't you?"

"You bet. I'm ready. It is a beautiful night though."

I looked up once more and then got back into the car. I turned on the light in the backseat and started to read the file.

I was clearly no longer directing the movie that had become my life.

But if I wasn't, who was?



CHAPTER 38

It had been several years since I had used the supersonic mag-levitation train of the Underground Railroad in the "Basement" as those in the know knew it. A new line had been dug into the subterranean earth linking up Jacobs in Fallon with the facility at Five-One. The "Mole-Men" were the guys that drove the huge boron nosed nuclear powered boring devices developed by Rockwell and Rand in the sixties. These had given way to ultra-modern sonic drillers, churning away, making tunnels to connect all of the important stages along the route, where secret government programs were being worked on.

The power stations, mag-rails and other features were placed into the holes as soon as they completed each section and moved onto the next. The Mole-Men were now heading northwest towards Puget Sound, getting ready to put the Bangor Washington Sub Base on their map which would complete the railroad from "Sea to Shining Sea". Someone suggested a ceremony where they would drive home a ceremonial golden spike once they made the connection.

The railroad was still the fastest land based transport system and only a handful of people used it, but it allowed them to move about without the knowledge of certain people...or beings. I'd settled into the executive transport car, the one supposedly only used by the President and his immediate associates, and, in a very short period, was lulled into a deep comfortable sleep as I whizzed along at four hundred to 800 hundred miles per hour, seven hundred feet below the surface of our great nation, in a pure oxygen haze.

I sat in the incredibly comfortable large leather chair, a form-contoured model, no doubt adapted from the little seats in the Sport Model at Groom Lake. Finally, a little practical reverse engineering, I thought. A faint nonintrusive sound came out of the overhead speaker and I found myself waking up, as the map display ahead of me on the wall indicated we were slowing down as we entered the Washington DC Metroplex area. The pressure and air changed inside the car and I felt wide-awake and very comfortable. The mag-train glided into the station,

called Executive One, right under the old Executive Office Building across the street from the White House. Harden, dressed in a suit and thin tie, was standing on the platform to greet me.

"Nice trip?" He motioned at the train car.

"I could use one of those at home. I had a really good sleep'," I shook his hand. "Are you now on-line and with me fulltime?"

"I am yours to command, Dr. Humphrey," The young man beamed at me.

"Let's get past the formalities. Call me Ted," I wanted this man to be content with this assignment and didn't want to start out with all the normal junk associated with superior to inferior relationships.

"Thank you. I prefer just Harden," I nodded and we walked over to the escalator that ran up to the sub-basement of the OEB, (Old Executive Building.)

"Everything ready upstairs?" I checked for the third time to make sure I had all my documents and IDs with me.

"Dr. Glipsen is awaiting you in his office. Everything else seems to be in normal condition," Harden looked around the empty station and appraised the set up.

"You haven't seen this place before?" I pointed back at the train.

"No, sir. Heard about it, but really didn't believe it existed. One hears a lot of scuttlebutt that isn't true out at Jacobs. I traded it off as just one more unfounded rumor." It took a good three minutes to get up to the sub-basement, changing escalators at least four times.

"When we go back out West, I'll try and get the use of that car again. It's the President's and it is very comfortable. A lot more so than the general transports. Since he's out of the country for a week or so, it shouldn't be too hard, but Harv is the man who controls all of that," I laughed knowing Harv's feelings that the mag-lift was his exclusive domain.

In the sub-basement the Marine sentries were waiting. They inspected all of my papers and asked me to sign-in on their electronic roster.

"Over there through that hallway, is the White House. The door leads directly into the Situation Room in the basement," I pointed to the nondescript cement hallway that had no sign on it.

"Really? I didn't know that." Harden said, looking around.

"I've only been in there once and that was a long time ago." We moved up to the elevator landing. It was a quick trip up to the third floor and the doors opened unto Harv's waiting room, with his secretary sitting there looking up.

"Go right in, Dr. Humphrey, Harvey is waiting for you." I thanked her and told Harden to grab some coffee as I'd be at least an hour or so.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Teflon Man!" Harv got up and we shook hands, gesturing me towards the couch and chair at one side of the room.

"Teflon man?" I asked, noting Harv's continuing sarcasm.

"Nothing sticks to you Sunny Jim. Not like the rest of us who get covered with crap and have to live with it," I saw by his eyes the envy of what I had accomplished.

"Makes you tough." I sat, waiting for him to have his fun at my expense. I owed him that much.

"Okay. So . . . I am still pissed off at you! I pick you up out of the dregs of Bar Stool and you come out as the hottest commodity since Lincoln ran for President. I'm an old guy, Ted, that just wants his declining years to be filled with accolades, glory and young girls, which I totally, utterly and completely deserve for putting up with the likes of old Scarface and young punks like you."

"Harv, if you'll remember correctly, I didn't want the job," I threw it right back at him. "You came to me, remember? I think you need to think through that series of events as well. Besides, I'm not here to listen to you bellyache about what you got going. I live in a hole in the ground in the middle of the desert, remember

"So do snakes!" Harv hissed, lobbing out one last grenade. "Now what is so goddamn important you used my train to get back here and talk to me about?" He paused and leaned forward. "You know you got Bellamy chewing his nails off right now? He's so concerned about you coming here he was ready to come off the island to be here," Harv laughed at that, starting to lighten up.

"Listen Harv, let me get to the matter at hand. I am working at putting the triangulation format in place right now. We should have everything ready for the first set of trials in less than a year. But, I need you to handle something really important for me." I waited to see if the old spark was there. I saw a faint glowing ember and waited for the idea to sink into his mind.

"And what would that be, Ted?" Harv leaned back in his chair and waited, wanting to hear if I had another errand boy task for him or if it was something really special.

"A few years ago you were the right hand man of President Reagan with his Star Wars program if I remember correctly." I needed for him to juggle all his thoughts into the proper order.

"Yeah, I was. But since the Ruskies went belly up everyone put that stuff on hold, 'cause they think it's a big money pit boondoggle," Harv was getting himself a candy out of the dish on the table in front of us.

"Here, look at this," I handed him a folder with the design of a hydrogen and fluorine chemical pump laser that fired an extremely fine and concentrated beam. Harv took the drawings and flipped through the

pages, then went back to the first page and started all over again, reviewing each page very carefully. It took a good ten minutes for him to finish his first analysis of the system.

He got up, got a calculator out of his desk and started plugging in numbers. Scratching his thick gray hair, he looked at the drawings, then at the notepad on his knee.

"You've jumped maybe two or three levels in this design. The guys at Lawrence Livermore worked on this, but only had it at a prototype level when funding was cut. You added at least ten different sub-systems to it that'll make this thing hum when it's fired. You work on this while you were goofing off out in Barstow?" He looked perplexed for a few minutes while he chewed his lip. "Y'know, you could take this thing and" The light went on and he brightened up, when he saw the whole system and what it was intended for. "You got to be shitin' me, kiddo!" The ember had become a flame and it was glowing white-hot.

"Not a bit," I said. "How long for you to gear someone up and stand on their tails to get ten of those babies built?"

"Fourteen, eighteen months tops. Most of this is off the shelf so it's available now. Man, this is a zapper that could punch holes in just about anything on this planet!" Harv was thinking of ground actions inside the atmosphere.

"Now, place that here," I pulled out a star chart and handed it to him. "It just sits and waits for our 'friends' to show up and then BLAMMO! A back up zone here, then another set to be deployed as needed and where needed. They come out of hyper-dimensional space and those babies go to work right in the middle of any kind of fleet they have." I'd seen it all in my head over the past few days. Hit and run surprises, knocking out five to ten motherships per unit.

"Would make someone stop and pondered if they had the right plan or not, wouldn't it?" Harv chuckled to himself. "But listen, if we build this system, how are we going to get it out far enough to deploy it in deep space?"

I sat and looked at him for a long minute letting my body language speak for me.

Harv gasped. "You don't mean to tell me you can use the Time Runner to deploy this?" Harv shook his head in disbelief. The Time Runner had been planned to heal up the holes in space, but no one had thought about using it to launch anything into deep space, like we used to do with the nuke probes back at Montauk a million years ago.

I handed him the second set of documents showing the modifications to the King's Peak, Utah unit that was a tuning module. It caused a resonant standing wave to occur in the field after it was tuned properly

and it would hi-locate the devices to any spot in the local galaxy within a fraction of a second.

"If NASA knew we had this, they'd join up with the CIA to try to take over this whole operation! All of us would be on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean for 'interviews' until we squealed for mercy," Harv laughed again and rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "The big black chip in the game, that is what this is, Teddy-boy." He got up and went over and pulled two beers out of his icebox in the office. "Twenty bucks!" He joked as he handed me one. "Ah, your credit's good here. I'll just dock your pay." He did, too.

Sitting there he looked at the drawings again and studied the fine details.

"This must have taken months to work on and resolve. This is so far out of your expertise area I can't believe you did this on your own. Crap, the chemistry alone is enough to make my poor old brain swim, just trying to remember what I learned in college. This way of amplifying the beam is truly amazing. We need to try it in small form on some really hard piece of metal, like titanium or something harder." Harv didn't follow up on the timeline and I wasn't about to tell him about Dr. Henry's visit, not now at least.

"Try it out on one of the saucers sitting at Five-One. That'd be comparable to the metal foil anyone would use for deep space. Build a small one and zap it with this. See what happens." I'd already been down this road and knew now why someone had wanted us to have those craft.

"You're getting into this business of killing aliens aren't you?" Harv looked deeply into my eyes.

"You bet your sweet ass! Did you see the film from Dulce?" I asked clenching my jaw.

"Yes, I did."

"Well, I saw the real thing. Vats with people half alive being reduced to their constituent genetic material. The nightmares have never gone away and probably never will. That," I stabbed at the file, "will help me sleep a lot better at night."

On reflection Harv dropped the topic, realizing I was more a man possessed by his own demons than he really cared to know. He rose, picked up the phone, then stopped.

"Can I tell Bellamy?" He held the phone without pushing the button.

"Your call Harv. You're still my boss the last time I checked the organizational chart," I said with lightness in my voice.

"Son, you don't work for anyone but yourself, you and I both know that, but thanks for the bone. It makes an old fat man feel good to at least think you still believe in lineage and chain of command, even though we

both know you could give a flyin' fuck at a rolling donut," Harv punched the button then threw the switch for the speakerphone.

The next forty-five minutes was a planning conference on who should do the work and how we should divide up responsibilities.

Just before I left, I took a ruler from the side of Harv's desk and took a Sharpie out of my, shirt breast pocket and drew a straight line across the top of the plans for our weapon. In my best block lettering I wrote:

"THE BUG ZAPPER."

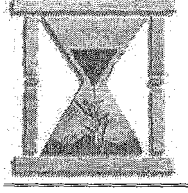
Harv turned the plans around to see the name and smiled and gave me a thumbs up as I left, leaving him to wheel and deal and work the phones. Dr. Harvey Glipson was back on track and running hot, fast and straight. I also got to use the President's mag-lift car for the trip back to Fallon and Jacobs Center.

Ah, it's good to be the king!

PART SEVEN

END GAME AT

THE EDGE OF TIME



CHAPTER 39

Two years came and went without problem or incident. Irina and I moved into a new apartment in the complex with our daughter, who would wear me out with questions at night about everything concerning my life. Pasha wanted to know every detail of it, from the time I was small to now. Not an easy task, to tell someone about all your mistakes, and still have them love you; but she did.

Irina and I had gotten closer and closer. Our nights lying in the cool bedroom of the complex were spent discussing all kinds of plans for when this never-ending nightmare would be done.

Her idea for retirement was a chicken and rabbit ranch somewhere where she could wear coveralls and let her hair grow long and not be concerned with it turning slowly gray, as we both grew old. Mine was a beach, someplace with a cold bottle of beer and a good book. We had to find the middle ground, but it was the common joke, about the differences between the souls of Russians and Americans. The American soul had a heart that lived on a farm and minds that filled the skyscrapers. The Russians, body, heart, soul and mind, dreamed of a dacha in the country with food, family and friends living in fear of no one. Oh, and heaters.

I had not seen Dr. Henry or anyone else for that period. The plan was coming together like we actually knew what we were doing. There'd been several incidents concerning 'Visitors' but the other Group leaders had taken care of them without much of my involvement. The device was moving along very well. The one under King's Peak, Utah, was already installed after we had tested it and certified it as workable. The other series, all seven of them, were in the pit and all of them were working as well. The only thing missing at present was the installation at the Bangor Sub Base in Washington State. The facility was not yet ready and there were endless problems again with DC.

A new administration had come into office and the whole process of re-education had been started by Harv's new undersecretary, a young Japanese/American scientist by the name of James Nakamura. An MIT grad in quantum physics and electrodynamics, he was bright and quick

and was looking for the fast track up the organization. So he never missed a chance to point out any and all of Harv's flaws to anyone over at the White House that would listen, though he knew nothing of Harv's background, devoted service and heroic deeds. He was trying to make his star rise a little faster than some of us thought he should and he wanted to climb up Harv's back to reach for the top of the shelf. This left Bellamy with the problem of pouring oil on the water constantly and having to make a lot of excuses for Harv. My heart went out to him, but there was little I could do. I'd never been in the Washington Merry-Go-Round and didn't want to start handling the problems of politics this late in my career.

Jack Thompson made one star general and, after talking to each of us separately, had decided to retire. He and Shirley wanted to spend the rest of their lives in the sun of Florida's west coast around Bradenton and raise their son. In my opinion he deserved it for his long and trusted service. At his going away party, he asked both Irina and I to come down and spend some time with them and maybe consider moving down there. Jack had some ideas for a technical business that would make them a considerable living and he had asked me to be a partner. It sounded great but I needed to see this project through to the end and he understood, letting me know that there was always a desk for me at the office right next door to his. I'd recommended Harden for the vacant post and, with Harv's support, he got it with a three jump rank increase. I knew he'd do a good job of filling Jack's boots and I had little need for him, since almost all of my time was spent inside the complex now.

One afternoon, from out of the clear blue sky, Bellamy called me.

"Teddy, can you get clown to Groom and meet with Harv, Nakamura and me, this afternoon?"

I looked at my calendar and realized it was clear with the exception of Admin functions, which I hated anyway. I agreed and took the sub-way in the early afternoon. It was a little over an hour trip.

I was met at Five-One by Nakamura. He started in at me almost immediately with no preamble or introductions like some small yippy Japanese dog. "Good to see you Dr. Humphrey. I am concerned that this project Dr. Gilpsen has been stewarding through isn't going to be all he cracked it up to be. If that is the case, the folks over at the White House want to know if you think it is time to replace him."

We got in the car and sped away toward the Groom Lake facility, while he continued his name dropping and listing all the reasons why we needed a new person sitting in Harv's chair. I was about ready to blow up, when we finally walked into the hanger next to the old facilities building.

"Ted, good to see you!" Harv took my hand and shook it really hard. Bellamy smiled and slapped me on the back.

"Everything running smoothly up at Jacobs?" He asked.

"Couldn't be better. Irina sends her greetings to both of you," I walked to one side of the hanger and looked at my old friend the Sport Model scout ship. Nakamura continued to yap away.

"I believe we should be working on this and trying to get it to fly again, Dr. Humphrey. It is a waste of valuable resources just sitting here. The small things we have found warrant us trying to take this apart and see what makes it work and then building our model," Nakamura had been told I held some kind of power in The Group and I was probably the conduit to getting things done. He looked with disdain on Harv who had plucked him out of obscurity, trained him, and now had the long suffering task of watching this man gnaw at the hand of the man who fed him. This was not the payback I would have expected from someone elevated so quickly within our ranks. It showed disrespect, dishonor, disloyalty and just plain bad manners.

I walked over to the covered unit sitting there all alone in the bay. I pulled the cover back and saw Dr. Rufus T. Henry's little present to me, two years ago. It was a chemical laser so compact it was less than ten feet long and no more than two feet across. I rubbed my hand down the framework like touching a gorgeous woman and looked at the various controls. It was aimed at the hull of one of the older ships that had sat useless in the far side of the bay for years.

"This toy work?" I looked at Bellamy then Harv.

"That is what we're here to see. In the lab it does fine, but you were the one who wanted to see if we could use it," Harv looked at me and then over at Nakamura.

"I don't think this is a proper use of resources and neither does the President. I was talking to his assistant the other day and they think we should use this device on the 'expendable' craft, as you call it in your memo Dr. Humphrey, for something better than this 'hocus pocus' stuff about aliens." Nakamura was bucking for another stripe on his sleeve, but he was not correct in his assessment of my view of the political realities understood by the President or his staff.

"A moment, gentlemen, if I may," I held up a hand to Nakamura and good old reliable Jamison stepped in front of him, to keep him from following Harv and Bellamy over to the corner of the hanger.

"Okay, *so...why* you are you keeping him?" I asked Harv in a low voice.

" 'It' has made some powerful friends over at that rented white house and I think I am on the slippery slope heading down and out to the trash heap if I fire him," Harv had a note of fear in his eyes. I looked at Bellamy, who smiled and nodded to me.

"It's your call, Ted. If you want us to take on this battle, I'm game for it. But there is no guarantee of the outcome. We have a standing executive order giving us a license and we are granted funds until 2012, but there may be a fecal blizzard if you do it," Bellamy rubbed his face and his scar puckered up and down. "Then again, we could be in the process of being sold down the river as well."

"How much about The Group does he know?" I asked Harv.

"Edges only. After the first six months I slowed down his access to files and that put a real twist in his little monkey tail," Harv looked old.

"Are you still up to handling this whole project Dr. Glipsen, without the use of your ...assistant...here?" I asked formally, already knowing the answer.

"I will give up one of my mistresses if it means me continuing to work with you two bandits," Harv laughed.

"Good enough." I walked back to where Nakamura was standing.

"Jim..." I started.

"I prefer to be addressed by my proper title as Doctor Nakamura, sir." He said, feeling rebuked and shunned from our private conclave.

"Jim," I let my uncaring sink in, "let me explain the ins and outs of power to you. Right now, you look to me like a bright young man who wants very badly to go places. I need to know what you have told those folks in the administration about our program here," I smiled at him.

"I understand that my security clearance doesn't...allow me ...to talk to outsiders about the program, but in only the most general terms." He dodged the question.

"Good answer. Now what have you told them specifically about our program?" I raised my voice slightly as Bellamy and Harv walked back up to where I was standing.

"I don't think my private conversations have anything to do with you," he flared.

"Didn't you tell me," I said to Jamison, only slightly raising the timbre of my voice, but never looking away from Nakamura, "that the communication intercept on Dr. Nakamura's phone had indicated he was actually going outside the proper boundaries, Mr. Jamison?" Jamison looked at me and picked up quickly on the move I was making.

"I did, sir, as I was instructed to do. He sounded to the technicians as though he was telling them what we were planning to do." Jamison never missed a beat. Even though we had not talked to each other in a couple of years.

"You couldn't have heard anything!" He said, a little too quickly.

"That is a secure line and they have it back traced."

"You don't think we can monitor your line without the White House knowing about it?" I feigned a hurt look.

"They told me all of the lines were checked and I was on a clear line!" Panic is always good to watch when you are not holding the losing hand.

"They didn't know we had a back trace of our own?" I said waiting for the full effect of my statement to hit him. "Now, why don't you tell me what they promised you for the information that you gave them?"

"I-I can't do that..." he stumbled again and hoped no one would notice. Harv was turning purple with rage.

"You had better," I said menacingly as I stepped in close to him, raping his personal space. "Because here are your choices at present:

"One: I leave you to the none too tender mercies of Mr. Jamison here, who will escort you to Diego Garcia for interrogation and detainment, until I feel anything you might know is worthless. That could be ten years in a cell in a place that makes Devil's Island look like Club Med.

"Two:" I flicked two fingers at the guards who marched to us and stood over him, "I have you taken outside to become a 'target of opportunity'. In non-military terms that means, I have run around a little bit crying, screaming and begging for mercy before you are shot. I'm sure Mr. Jamison would follow my direct orders without question.

"Three: I have you tried for treason. I don't know if you read the small print on your employment contract, but it's there. Oh, and don't worry, no one will know about it because it will be before a military tribunal, right here, not in a federal court, and, again ... it takes a little longer, but I have you shot. So think about your next answer, very carefully. What, and who, have you told about us?" I stood there and suddenly Jamison pulled out his large framed automatic and jacked a round into the chamber, then held it by his side. The other two guards followed suit.

"Y-you c-c-can't! You don't have the right! I need to c-c-all general counsel at the White House and speak with them and have them talk to you!" Nakamura was in hysterics.

"Oh, you are very mistaken, doctor. I do have the right and I will use my power, and, no, you are never talking to anyone at the White House ever again. That is the least of my promises to you." I reached up and snapped my fingers and one of Bellamy's other assistants handed me a cellular phone and I dialed.

"Give me LaCross. LaCross? This is Humphrey," I waited for a moment. "I have just ordered Dr. Nakamura executed as an enemy of the state. Tell the President that if he tries to infiltrate my organization again, I will pull a Kennedy on his ass! Am I clear, Mr. LaCross?" I hung up and handed the phone back to the man.

"T minus one minute.. *Jimmy*," Jamison cocked his weapon and slightly lifted it, followed by the guards. Everyone was absolutely still.

Nakamura's mouth moved, unable to make a word, as he looked pleadingly back and forth between us all.

"Mr. Jamison, take this son of a bitch out and ..."

"WAIT! Just wait!! I'll tell you! I've been meeting with the President's private assistant for internal security matters. We never meet at the White House but at various places around McLean. She didn't want to meet me where anyone would see us talking. I told her everything I knew or that I could find out, by going through Harvey's desk at night. I told her about the triple jump and the laser. I added some stuff to make me look better. I wanted to make a good impression with her, since she told me there might be a senior staff level job that she could get me into with this Administration." He was crying out of fear.

All three of us shared a look of concern. "What was her name?"

"C-corbett!" He burred out through his sobs.

"Ann Corbett?"

"Yes!" He looked up, surprised that we knew the name. "Dr. Ann Corbett! The President's assistant," Nakamura could hardly speak.

"Son of a bitch!!" Harv exploded at me. "I thought you killed that bitch years ago, Ted!"

"So did I, Harv," I turned to Bellamy. "Call whoever you call at the White House. See if she is really there. I doubt it, but make the effort to find out. Maybe we can find a way to trap her." I walked a few feet away.

"Boss Three?" Jamison was ready to do the guy right there.

"Morgan isn't it?" I turned to one of the security men who stepped forward.

"Yes, sir. Corporal Stan Morgan, sir!" He was like a rail in front of me. "Get a stenographer, a clean room in the facility, a team of security guys to surround it and have Jamison take Nakamura into it. He is going to tell you the where, when and how of everything he's reported. Use the bug juice if you need to. High intensity. Is that clear?" I looked over my glasses at the man and then to Jamison who knew exactly what I meant. If Nakamura was going to have any recall lapses, Jamison would quickly revivify his memory, with the back of his hand.

"Sir!" Morgan spun and dashed away at a sprint.

"Jami, don't let him out of your sight, do you understand me?" Jamison looked hard at me and then back at Nakamura.

"Intrusions?" The best word he could come up with, but I got the drift.

"Exactly. I want him in one piece, but he doesn't have to be ... whole ... when we go to the President." Jamison nodded and grabbed the man by belt and the scruff of his suit and pushed him toward the facility door like a Scottish bouncer about to toss a drunk into the

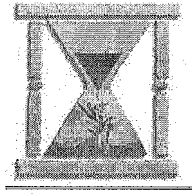
muck of the gutter, which is exactly what his life would now be... if he lived that long.

"The President?" Bellamy said softly to me.

"Absolutely. This guy doesn't want any bad press. We show him the transcript of a traitor as well as someone using official documents from his Administration, which he won't be able to justify, he's going to play ball with us all the way," I said with anger in my voice.

"Who the hell did you call?" Harv asked.

"Shit, I don't know. I think it was Ramona at The Cotton Tail Bunny Ranch in Pahrump." I didn't even smile at my statement. I had become the master of the bluff and I was very good at it.



CHAPTER 40

As the three of us stood there looking at one another, no one wanted to start with the obvious questions: How had they done it? Who was controlling the operation? Why did they want to know so much if their guys were beyond defeat? It was all very clear to me. I 'd been working on this problem long enough to know there were certain bits and pieces of it no one else really understood but me, and it was going to stay that way for right now.

"Well. What should we do, Ted?" Bellamy asked. While Harv was looking at the ground feeling like he had let us all down by hiring someone who got caught up and used in just one more lousy little plan someone else had created.

"I came here to watch a weapons demonstration. Kicking junior's ass was just for shits and giggles. Harv would've taken care of it in time. I know that." I lied. But it didn't matter. No one was going to keep me from making sure that no fleet of invaders would ever land on my planet as long as I had anything to say about it.

"You can be a kind man as well as a tyrant, Theodore," Harv looked up at me. "You just flushed that kid down the toilet and didn't give him a sheep's chance in a wolf pack"

"What!?" I yelled. I wondered what was up with Harv. "You feel bad for him?"

"No, I don't. It's just I never thought when you came aboard you'd end up being like Bellamy here: a black hearted cold-blooded bastard, only slightly better looking," Harv shook his head. "But you're twice the fiend he is. I think you enjoyed that little demonstration of power back there. And it was not just for young Nakamura." Harv walked over toward the 'Bug Zapper' the coined phrase we used for the new laser system.

"Being compared to me in the same sentence must hurt?" Bellamy noted.

"Not at all, George," I followed them behind the shield erected on the edge of the hanger. "Not at all."

"We've got the power setting on the highest function possible. It should engage and probably blast a hole right through that craft. It is our belief that when this device is deployed, in space, and at full power, it will knock out the complete drive system of any ship it's pointed at. Ted explained to us how this is supposed to work and the small test bench model has performed admirably, but this is the first run of the bug zapper at a composite material that our best instruments cannot even scratch."

Harv finished the adjustment with the test team. "There should be a sixty nano-second burst and a small flash. Then we'll see if our theory works in the real world."

Harv moved back behind the shield and picked up the phone. He told security to put out the alarm throughout the building, that we were doing a test shot, and nobody should be surprised. No one would probably even hear it, but those of us on the hanger deck floor.

"On my mark, five, four, three, two and one. Engage!" Harv did the countdown and pressed the sequencer to operate the Zapper. The Zapper warmed up for a moment, humming solidly. There was a small blue flash and a steady stream of blue plasmic energy shot out of the gun's muzzle with an electric buzzing sound. For the next sixty seconds we watched it harmlessly twinkle on the hull of the alien spacecraft. It shut down timidly on its own, smoking gently.

We walked over to the ship and there was not a scratch on it. Harv reached out his hand and touched the skin where the beam had struck, and it was dead cool to the touch.

"So," Harv said, beyond miffed, "Waddaya going to invent next? The sparkler? You can use this piece of shit to gay up Fourth of July all over the country! Maybe we can stick a Piccolo Pete up the exhaust pipe and light it to juice up the power! Or maybe stick a playing card in the spokes to give it that Big Wheel Sound of Power! You goddamn id-jits!"

I opened my briefcase and handed Harv a small electronic box with one single connector on it.

He looked at it for a moment and then up at me, turning red again.

"What the hell is this?" Harv held it gingerly in his hand.

"A cascading multiplier." I pointed at the connector. "Pin ten, please. The slot you wanted removed from the original designs. That is what it's for."

"This wasn't on the original drawings, was it?" Harv looked at the unit.

"No," I said flatly.

"Oh great!" Harv was annoyed again and tossed his hands in the air when he talked: "So, does this little whatchama fuck it make the device go, like, invisible or something?"

"Something." I wasn't going to say anything else. I'd made my point. They'd doubted me and this was the least I could do to not make that happen again. Also I wasn't sure if Harv had been compromised or not by Nakamua and my suspicions had just been validated.

Harv handed the box to a technician that plugged it into the Bug Zapper and walked back to the control housing.

"Put it on the lowest setting, please," I asked lab tech politely.

"All systems checked and ready. Commence countdown on my mark..." Harv started up again. I yelled over at the technician.

"Oh, just pull the trigger!"

An electric blue flash filled the hanger, followed by a thunderous explosion, followed by another explosion that caused the floor to tremble and shake like an earthquake. The rolling sensation almost knocked all of us off our feet. Security men were running in with guns drawn looking for the mad bomber that just hit the building.

"It's alright, it's just a test!" Harv was coughing and trying to clean the smoke away from in front of his face.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Look at that!" Harv was the first out from behind the shield.

A hole had been ripped a good ten feet wide in the length of the craft, splintering the metal and a new circulation hole had been blown through the outside cement wall of the building about four feet in diameter and continued through a number of other buildings used, thankfully, just for storage, and then there was a hole in a mountain some 20 miles away.

Bellamy walked over to the craft and was going to touch it until he felt the heat coming off the destroyed hull and then kneeled down and put his head in the hole. It was the first time anyone had seen inside it since we had it.

"What is the range on full power, Ted, if you have an idea?" Bellamy asked.

"Lethal at two thousand kilometers in space on the medium setting. That was low at one. On high power? I have no idea." I was still shaking from the blast.

"Nice gadget you got there, nephew. How in the hell does it work?" Harv went over and pulled the multiplier out of the socket and held it up.

"Folds the waves back on themselves and then sets up a resonating circuit inside the tube. It'll work much better in the vacuum of space." I pulled out the plans for it and handed them to Harv.

"Make it small enough we could sell it to wrecking yards to cut cars in half, or quarters, or down to their original molecular structure." He looked at the drawing and showed it to the technician next to him. I picked up my briefcase and started to leave without a word. I now had the means I needed to complete the program. A way of getting a platform

into deep space at an exact location and time and a weapon that would pulse enough energy to destroy a whole enemy fleet without hesitation. Bellamy jogged across the hanger to catch up with me.

"What would you like me to do with Nakamura?" He asked as we were walking.

"What is your plan, Boss?" I deferred to him.

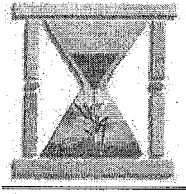
"Hide him away for a few years and then let him go." I stopped and listened to him carefully.

I remembered Ann Corbett, disguised as a waitress in that restaurant, standing near my father that night, so many years ago and what had happened to him, and what she had done to Ellen, someone we all loved. I looked at Bellamy for a long moment, clenched my jaw and just turned and walked away.

"I understand, Ted," Bellamy walked back toward Harv. Nakamura wouldn't be talking to anyone else when Bellamy was through with him. It might not have been the way my father or Dr. Henry would have done it, but I didn't have the luxury of traveling to the stars and learning kindness from gentle pixie people who just used their minds to create reality. I was still in the middle of a poker game with all the black chips on the table and ... ah, hell! Who was I kidding?

This was a goddamn war!

But I sure as hell wasn't going to lose because somebody else had an ace up their sleeve.



CHAPTER 41

Time was passing quickly now. Seven months had gone by since the Bug -Zapper test at Groom Lake. I was spending more time working on the Bangor, Washington submarine base problems, getting the facility finished. It seemed like one thing after another delayed bringing this damn station online. Irina had finished up her part of the project and needed a break. We agreed, because of my schedule, she and Pasha would take a vacation. They wanted to spend the summer touring America looking for a nice place to raise chickens, rabbits and Pasha. They'd been cooped up long enough under this sterile cement and steel hive. I didn't blame them for wanting to have some adventures in the outside world.

We said our good-byes and that we'd join back up in October. I thought I'd have everything done by then and we'd get a place in the country around Elko, Nevada where Pasha could have a horse and Irina could raise rabbits.

Dreams fulfilled: check!

I'd been fighting with some techies about the placement of the new device at the Bangor submarine station. I couldn't make them understand it had to be exactly aligned to the north/south magnetic poles, and the platform had to rotate and adjust ever so slightly if the mag poles moved or shifted, and if they had to re-pour the whole damn building then that was what had to be done.

The next phone call was not one I expected.

"Ted? You got a clean black suit and tie?" George Bellamy said.

"Why?" I joked. "We going to a funeral?"

Bellamy and I had grown closer again over the past few months. He kept me informed on the progress Harv was making in DC. It seemed like the President had seen things our way and had committed fully to our project without hesitation after reading the transcript of the Nakamura confession. One of his own advisors meeting with Ann Corbett had forced the President to deal with it. It apparently wasn't pretty and became much like Dr. Bates' "departure".

"Yes," Bellamy said flatly. There was a long, emotional pause. "Harvey died."

"Oh my God!" I felt a stabbing pain that went through to my soul. Harv had always been there for me and I didn't want to think about finishing this project without him.

"When? What happened?"

"Yesterday. Heart attack. Too much pressure. Old age. Diabetes, drinking too much, not exercising, this crappy life we live..." Bellamy was clearly upset as well.

"Where's the funeral?" It was the only thing I could think of asking, under the circumstances.

"Arlington. Just a graveside service. The President, First Lady, a couple of close friends of his out of the Senate and Congress. And us. You and me. We're the only friends he had." Bellamy was making an exception to his own rule.

"I understand, Boss. He didn't have any family did he?" I closed my eyes and felt the emotions well up inside.

"We're his family, Ted. We were all he had. Us, and this piece of shit job!" I already knew the answer and, like most families under pressure, we were all dysfunctional as hell.

"I'll be there, Boss." I hung up and sat for a few minutes thinking about what I could do. Then I remembered a lot of bad jokes over the years that made me smile.

I called Harden in DC, who was now head of the security section, and asked him to make certain arrangements for me for tomorrow. He was a little shocked but complied with my request when I explained why I needed the special attention.

I called Jack Thompson but only got the message machine telling me he and his family were in Europe for the summer. I didn't leave a message.

* * * *

It was a humid morning in Arlington, Virginia, as I walked up the grassy knoll in the garden of stones that used to be the home of Gen. Robert E. Lee but which now holds the mortal remains of our best and most dedicated. The path had been cordoned off and Secret Service was everywhere. I strolled among the rows of fallen heroes. As I passed some of the stones I stopped and read the inscriptions. First World War, Second World War, Korea, Viet Nam; they were all here and in good company. At the top of the rise stood a small group of mourners. Within the knot was the President and First Lady and several men I didn't know with their

wives. An honor guard was positioned slightly off in the distance and a bugler stood at attention.

I saw Bellamy and walked up next to him. He was standing with a group of six young beautiful crying women, all stylishly dressed in black with black lace veils over their faces. Bellamy motioned for me to come by his side. One of the women came close and took my arm. I held her hand. The flag draped coffin stood above a hole in the most holy ground this country has. The President stepped forward and nodded to me.

"Now that we are here, I would like to take this time to express a few words for my fallen friend. Doctor Harvey Wilcox Glipson was a true American hero. From the beaches of Normandy as a young Captain to the hand-to-hand trench warfare of Capital Hill, Harvey has been on the front lines for over five decades of government service. Never asking anything for himself, but always giving the full measure of dedication and service to this nation. I personally knew Harvey and liked him very much for his wit, charm and intelligence. He never failed to bring a smile to my face."

The President went on. I almost puked. If Harv heard all this happy horseshit he'd be laughing his ass off. He'd twisted this turkey's tail feathers almost out of their sockets and laughed like a hyena about it. This guy had been pushed into a corner with no place to go by Harv and was probably overjoyed he was dead. But the news crews being held at a distance were eating up the clandestine, shadow world, private ceremony with the President speaking for an old time friend that no one knew anything about or who he was or what he did. The cover story the White House released was that Harv was a super-secret spook of some kind. They would try to get all the mileage they could out of this, with all the brouhaha going on about the President's land deal down in his home State of Arkansas. The woman next to me almost bent over crying her eyes out and held on to me tighter. Bellamy looked out the corner of his eye and nodded his approval.

"Harvey Gilpsen was one of the last great heroes of this century and he will be truly missed. I would like to ask his closest friends if there is anything they would like to say."

Bellamy declined as did I. At some prearranged signal three rounds of rifle fire from seven guns filled the air. The wailing of the women next built to a fever pitch. The bugler played taps and the uniformed men came forward and took the flag, folding it, then presented the triangled banner to Bellamy. He held it to his heart for a moment then gave it to me and I kissed it. I handed it to the woman next to me holding my arm. She clutched it to her chest and dried her tears on it. One of the other women stepped forward and knelt clown in her tight black dress and four inch black high heels. She laid her hand on the casket and leaned

forward to kiss the top of the box. A set of four jets screamed over and one pilot pulled out, in the famous "Missing Man Formation". The President stepped forward and helped the beautiful young woman to her feet. She leaned her head against his shoulder and touched his hand. He patted it and helped her back into the group with a few kind words.

Just as they started to lower the coffin, I stepped forward and motioned for them to stop. Everyone watched carefully as I pulled a bottle of beer out of my pocket and laid it on the coffin.

"One for the road, old friend."

I stepped back and Bellamy pulled out a small box that contained a medal, which no one in the crowd could recognize. It looked like something I'd never seen and put it on the coffin as well. Then they lowered the most miserable, hard drinking, womanizing, funniest, most charming, most irritating, hard to get along with, lovable bastard I had ever known, into the hallowed sacred ground of the Arlington national cemetery. The Earth that I, too, would die to defend.

Bellamy and I escorted the women down to the three waiting limos and helped them into the cars in their grief. I knew I'd get the flag back, but that was between me and Harden.

As we walked up the lane, one of the President's aides joined us for a short walk.

"The President wanted to know if those ladies were relatives of Harvey's," he asked Bellamy. "The President wondered if he should have their addresses to send bereavement letters?"

"They were his mistresses, son. All six of them. The best women any man could ever know. And that is not for publication, is that understood?" Bellamy turned and glared at the man, who got the message loud and clear. He moved back up the hill toward his own group.

"Ted, of all the low down dirty tricks that anyone could have played! My God, man! That was the President of the United States!" He laughed out loud. "I wish I'd thought of it!"

"I'll give you the flag for our collection on the island when Harden retrieves it for me." I said quietly while taking his arm and walking among the stones.

"Were they actresses?" Bellamy leaned toward me.

"No, they really are Harvey's mistresses. Call girls," I smiled. "The highest priced ones in New York. Harvey had expensive tastes in women. Harden called them up on short notice and they all showed up this early in the morning, which is a small miracle in and of itself. They all wanted to be here to send Harv off. Of course they cost the American taxpayers about \$15,000 apiece, plus expenses. But I wasn't going to let that old son-of-a-bitch get out of this world without being represented by those he knew and loved so hard and so well." I chuckled.

Harv would have died to see this!" He patted me on the back and actually gripped me around the neck. "Best money we've ever spent!"

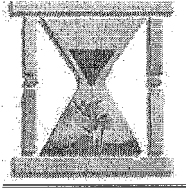
Bellamy was still laughing when another figure dressed in a black snit, tie, top-coat and hat, walked up next to us.

"May I join you boys in grieving for our old friend?"

The old black man looked like he fit in very well with us misfits in his dapper tux from the 1950s.

"Dr. Rufus T. Henry!" Bellamy yelled in delighted surprise. "You are always welcome in our company. How are you, sir?"

Bellamy took his arm and the three of us walked down through the garden of the rows of sacred stones, talking about life, the universe and everything in it.



CHAPTER 42

October came and went. I was Perseus battling the monstrous Kraken that had become getting the goddamned Bangor, Washington submarine base online. Two steps forward, was one step back, because of just stupid crap. Contractor disputes, labor issues and working on a top-secret nuclear naval base didn't help. The whole thing was working under some gypsy curse! The Navy was less than cooperative since they felt left out of our loop, so they made it as difficult as possible to work around them. But I had just waited to hand them a peace offering that'd change this rapidly by the first of the year.

Irina found a place west of Fallon off Hwy. 50 closer to Fernley and we bought it. Pasha was enrolled in the local school and was doing fine. I made it home usually two out of five days and most weekends. Irina knew the difficulties I faced, since she'd been through much of the same when she'd worked on building the devices. There were periods when she'd spend seven days a week in her lab pounding out the details and following up with the technicians. So I was given the latitude I needed, as we both knew this would be finished soon and I'd be able to return to a normal life, whatever that was.

For months after Harvey's funeral, I'd collected tabloid articles about the secret ceremony at Arlington where the nation's leaders had gathered to plant one of the top spooks in the world. The long distance photos showed the tight knot of women listed as "sexual assets" used by this spymaster to infiltrate the highest realms of foreign governments.

Harden, in his usual perfection, required every one of the women to sign a National Security Form meaning they could never disclose why they were there, and this just heightened the media frenzy to find them and question them about their work, since after the funeral they disappeared into the background of everyday life. One cover I especially liked a long shot photo of three smiling men in dark topcoats, walking through the gardens of stones at Arlington. The caption was, "New spy masters divide the kingdom!" It was great. Irina, Pasha and the new

media blitz on Harv's funeral, were the only pleasures in life I had right now.

Rufus told us what was in the silver titanium Haliburton case and why it was so important. It was a detailed analysis of all the Visitor's battle plans for the invasion of Earth. It marked out landing sites, points of infiltration and neutralization for the enemy fleet to concentrate on and, most importantly, the route they would take and the timetables for their scheduled arrival. It had been moved up, quite a bit, from our first estimates, which had no doubt been pushed back due to their defeat at Dulce, but we had absolutely no idea how far or how much time we had bought ourselves. This drove me even harder to complete the grid design I needed to test the Bug Zapper within.

Bellamy had been working with his part of The Group to set up various points where they thought our tests should be conducted first and then the ambush points along the route. He'd decided to divide up our operations into two units: a defensive unit that he managed along with the MIB group and I was named head of the offensive operations group. This made me virtually the Boss over all ground and space based systems used to prevent a mass landing. George was my back up and I was his. He was the signal calling middle linebacker and I was the quarterback. So we ended up as equals in a world where that seldom works out well. But we made it work exactly the way it was supposed to, and we were now true friends united against a common enemy.

By December, I had seven operational Zappers sitting in the basement waiting for testing and deployment. HMRP in Alaska was online and worked well enough to create a disruptive field of energy over half the globe. Nothing could get through it that used any kind of electromagnetic or anti-matter drive system. As soon as it entered the envelope, the field would interrupt the proton flow of the Element 115 to Element 116 anti-matter reaction. Their main drive would sputter and cough, then choke out and they'd free fall thousands of feet and splatter on the ground like bugs on a windshield. There would hardly be anything left for the Project: Pounce team boys to recover. It did play havok with the weather though, as the conspiracy theorists conjectured, but, *Cie' la vie' Cie' la guerre!* Such is life, such is war.

Over the past two years I had Jack Thompson's new aerospace company hired on a huge government contract to work on designing the new ETS (Earth To Space) fighter aircraft designed to carry the new advanced THOR'S HAMMER-4-A, or just the THOR-4-A. He'd performed a herculean job and melded all of my desired systems into the craft we now had Lockheed Martin building, in mass, for us at the Skunk Works near Tonopah, Nevada. The folks who built the U-2, the SR-71 Black Bird and the new F-117, F-117-A and Y-A fighters that had their

debut during Desert Storm. These guys were experts at building modern composite aircraft in short order and for high dollars from the taxpayers. But that hadn't mattered. I wanted fourteen of them and the first four I gave to the Navy as a bargaining chip for assistance with finally getting Bangor finished. Damn squids!

By February, I had a dozen admirals kicking ass and taking names around Bangor, getting my job done for me. The new aircraft used tech that no one in the Pentagon even knew we had until they saw it fly at Groom Lake and then all hell broke loose.

The Air Force Space Command Group, that was supposed to be the first line of defense in space, were breathing fire over the fact that the Navy had been given first choice of the new bird. The grumbling from DC was that we had done a dirty deal to create two organizations to provide the same service. A couple of Air Force four-star generals wanted my head on a platter and were being very vocal about it.

Bellamy had done his best to pour oil on the troubled waters, but it wasn't selling among the brass. They wanted in and there was not going to be any way they would give up their grasp for power without Presidential intervention. That was probably the last thing we could count on, I thought. I had my intelligence unit pulling everything they could to find a handhold on that slippery Southern bastard in the White House. I had to assume that role since Harv's departure for the Great Beyond and I hadn't found anyone I could trust to do it for me. But then a little bit of information showed up that I thought might help.

I called the President and got straight through to him without the normal run around with aides.

"Yes Dr. Humphrey," he answered the phone with his normal abrasive and less than tactful business voice.

"I understand there are some problems with the Air Force over one of my new projects?" I asked trying to bear in mind this was the leader of the free world and one of the most *publicly* powerful men on the planet. It still didn't mean much to me.

"Well you might say that," he said in that soft whispery Southern drawl of his. "It seems they feel *you* have gone outside your purview and stuck *your* nose into *their* business."

"I understand that, but there are certain circumstances that warrant my decision." I could play at this level of gamesmanship as well.

"Look!" The niceness wore off very quickly. "That prick Glipsen tried to blackmail me and I played along. But right now, I don't think any of what you guys are doing is warranted. So, I'm not going to even try to pull your chestnuts out of the fire. I am going to sit back and watch those self-inflated brass hats tear you a new asshole and trip you up every way possible! Now what part of *that* don't you understand, Humphrey? I am

very well aware that you had Jim Nakamura killed," there it was. "Now, I had to live with that, but don't think I don't know you guys think you can take over anytime you want! *That* is not gonna happen!"

"Are...You...*through*?" I slammed the ball right back cross-ways over the net to see how he'd play his back-hand.

"WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT MEAN?" He yelled in the phone.

"I would highly suggest you pick a side here and hold to it. Waffle on this one and I can promise you your days of luxury and happiness are at an end...*sir*." I read the file in front of me.

"Humphrey...are you *threatening* me?" He was livid.

"No, sir. I am telling you I expect you to calm those idiots who think they know something down. Do that and I am willing to help you with a little problem of your own," I waited, still holding my temper.

"What problem?" He was angry, but curious now.

"Angel Fire." I spoke very softly into the phone.

"What do you know about that?" I heard the rage in his voice he was fighting mightily to contain.

"That all of the files are located in one spot, so none of your people can see or get to them. Looks to me like you got a little problem that will blow up in your face and this Administration isn't going to survive it," I took one sheet of paper and placed it in the fax machine on the table behind my desk and hit the special number that placed it right on his desk.

"Take a look. I'd shred it if I were you," I waited and could hear the fax working behind him. There was a two-minute pause in conversation.

"Where did you get this?" The President exploded. "I could have you disappeared, do you know that?"

"You *really* want to play this game? The 'who's got the most power' game? I wouldn't if I were you. You have no idea what I can do," I was very relaxed and, in fact, I was enjoying playing Harv's favorite pastime: pin, then twist, the tail on the President. Especially this Southern Fried jack-ass.

"What does that mean?" He said with deadly calm.

"What would happen if just twenty papers like that ended up, somehow, on the desk of the editor of the New York Times. It would make Nixon look like a hero," I laughed outloud.

"You wouldn't dare!" He hissed into the phone.

"How far are you willing to go to prove that point, Mr. President? I am trying to help you. You want to start a war with me and my people? Over what? Especially since what I want is no skin off your ass, and is really just asking a few people to be reasonable."

Silence on the end of the phone. I waited.

"Alright! You have my attention. What do you want? If, this problem can just go away," he was now probing to see what he could get out of it. Good. We had gotten past the obligatory penis waving and straight to "Let's Make A Deal."

"A confidential Executive Order establishing a multi-task force of military under our direct control with full power to make or break anyone who doesn't toe the line. A joint space defense command that George Bellamy and I will head," I answered.

"And this stuff?" I heard the shredder working in his office.

"It all just disappears, like a bad dream," I figured I could drop a crew into the federal building in Oklahoma City, and pull all the files, using one of the small devices and they would be gone, out of sight, out of mind.

"I'll comply, but only after you've proven to me Angel Fire is permanently removed from view." Trying to bluff me with a ten, a three and seven in his hand?

"Forget it," I laughed so he could hear. "Too bad for you. Sorry I wasted your time," I got ready to hang up.

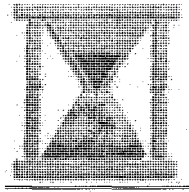
"Wait! Hold on just a minute! If I do this, I want oversight!" He tried after looking at his hole card.

"Good luck," I paused. "I want the order with a non-expiration clause in it and no over-ride from any future President, so I don't have to go through this again," I waited, gloating over my brace of four shiny aces, king high. He folded.

"Alright, alright! I'll have it drafted and sign it before the end of the week. You'll get a copy and so will the Joint Chiefs. But, God, they will just explode." This was good.

"Smooth their feathers or fire them, I really don't care," I thought for a minute and then added. "By the end of April the problem will be handled." I hung up and sat back. If that man could get to me he'd surely have me killed like everyone else he had problems with. The press even coined the term "Arkansas Suicide" for all his associates that had woken up dead, after "killing themselves" with a baseball bat.

I got back to work. Putting the file aside, I needed to get a team together and prepare them for the time jump and retrieval



CHAPTER 43

The firestorm in Washington was still raging. I got the retrieval team assembled and we were getting ready to make the jump that we put off till the end of April because of some logistics we needed to iron out. That's when Bill Stewart, who'd been with me for a year, stepped into my office.

Saying nothing, he opened up the TV cabinet. We watched a reporter standing in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

"What we know right now is that a lone bomber has destroyed the Murrah Building killing scores of people. A truck bomb exploded this morning and authorities are searching to locate the person or persons responsible for this cruel and hideous action."

I turned it off and sat down at my desk.

"I guess that kinda ends our little snatch and grab raiding party doesn't it?"

"Looks like someone saved us the trouble. From that picture, he hit the spot we were planning to be in," I thought about the synchronicity of events on this timeline and wondered if someone else had decided to aid or help. It was too close for comfort for me.

I already had the Executive Order in hand and the first meeting was planned for next month with the command staff from the military. So no one was going to try and back pedal, especial in light of the bomb blast that ripped a building apart. I think the man in that rented house in DC would be quaking in his boots right about now. He'd never believe we'd be this open and brazen to do the job. But if we did do this, he'd know I wouldn't hesitate to commit to the same kind of action if he didn't play ball with me in the future. I was convinced he wouldn't want another phone call like the last one.

I set the working file on Angel Fire in the OUT box. I wouldn't be needing that one any more.

Bellamy called in the late afternoon. "A little messy, don't you think?" His opening line.

"It did the job for us, didn't it?" I gave up nothing.

"Yeah, well, I've had one call after another from insiders wanting to make sure we know they are with us, totally, 100%," he actually laughed. "I've talked to six Senators, fifteen Congressmen and a half dozen heads of State. For some reason they all think one of us is crazy, so, of course, they called me." Bellamy was being his direct self as always.

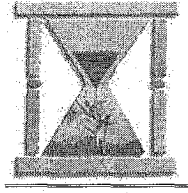
"You want me to tell you it wasn't me?" I asked feeling annoyed and trying to get rid of a headache.

"Hell no!" He paused. "I don't care if you did it or didn't do it. It got us some in roads right now to folks that don't want to be on our bad side, I will tell you that much."

"Is there any chance of pulling Jack Thompson back in with us?" I'd been working through the joint operations list and needed someone I could trust to head it up.

"Funny you should ask. I had a similar feeling. What do you think about giving him three stars and making it public?" Bellamy was right there. "The grand new Hemispheric Space Command, representing all branches of the services?"

"Make it happen, George. He knows the game and won't get lost in all the bullshit. Hell, give him four stars if wants them. I need that entire group operational in less than a year." I hung up without another word. I wanted to head home and see Irina and Pasha. I felt very tired.



CHAPTER 44

When I pulled into the driveway, Pasha was riding her horse with Irina watching proudly. She ran over and wrapped herself around me. "I am so glad to see you!" She looked up and kissed me.

As I stood there, realizing how much I loved her and our daughter, I pushed my world away and wanted to just get lost in her eyes.

"I wanted to see you two in the light of day for a change. Crawling in bed at ten at night and leaving at five in the morning doesn't seem like a life to me right now." I waved at our daughter riding around the paddock.

"She understands and so do I. But it is good to have you here. Oh! Let me show you the bunnies!" We strolled over to the new hutches and she pulled out one of the little rabbits and held it to her chest. I rubbed its fur and the little critter snapped at me.

"He's a biter," she laughed. "That will make him a good breeder when he is older. The dominant male."

We had a split level, modern ranch-type home, with all the luxuries Irina never expected to have in her lifetime. Ten fenced acres, a barn, two dogs and a couple of big, thick furry blue-eyed white Norwegian Forest cats, like Shalu, Bates' amazing cat at the Montauk lab. They were very aware this was their home and that I was simply their slave.

Irina brought over a letter from the table and handed it to me as I fell into the large leather recliner in the living room. It was from Oxford University.

"Our daughter graduates high school this year and we need to think about her future as well. She's been accepted into the arts program." Irina was beaming and I just felt old. I read the letter and saw she'd been given a complete scholarship for the five-year program. "They looked at her works and immediately granted entrance. Isn't that wonderful?"

I didn't know what to say. It had just seemed like yesterday I started at USC and now my own daughter was getting ready to go to college. I found myself feeling sorry for the years I missed out on her life.

"Oxford is a long way. Don't you think we could find a school a littler closer?" It sounded so feeble and selfish I couldn't believe I was saying it,

but Irina's eyes never missed a thing when she looked into me.

"Let's see, Clark County Community College or Oxford University?" She acted like she was balancing something in her two hands. "Besides, when we visit her there, we can just head on to Russia and see my mother!"

"Will they let you in?" I was puzzled, not realizing it was her twisted dark Russian humor.

"Is not the getting in that's hard, " she laughed. She took the letter and headed off for the kitchen to do something.

"Never is. Is it?" I said to myself. "It's always the getting out that's the bitch," I leaned back and drifted into sleep before I knew it.

I was home and felt safe around my family.

I awoke about three in the morning. Irina had placed a light blanket over me and she was sleeping on the couch next to me. My pager was vibrating on my belt as I sat up. She stirred then went back to sleep as I padded softly across the living room in my stocking feet to my small home office.

I called the "Panic" number at Jacobs and they patched me through to the monitoring station in the Caymans. Jamison answered the scrambler.

"Boss, we got a situation." I heard his clipped, perfect words on the line, tinged with his Scottish brogue.

"Go"

"Bellamy is out for the count. The heads of each section have been notified. Sao Paolo has the baby. The senior members of The Group just got off the vid-con. You were the subject and no one wanted to call you until Boss One's last request was fulfilled," I could hear the pain in his voice. "Confirmed and approved as of this elate, 0931 Universal Time, Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr., you are now the head of The Group, and your new call sign is Boss One..." Jamison stopped talking, choked with emotion.

"Jami, I am truly sorry," he'd been with Bellamy as long as I could remember, his absolute right hand.

"It was quick. He knew something was wrong. He left detailed orders, which I was required to follow. There was no slight intended, sir." Still the ever dutiful soldier.

"None taken. What arrangements?" I didn't want to go to another funeral, but I knew I had to.

"Already clone. Cremated today. No services. His wishes. What are my orders, Boss One?"

I was stunned. I'd expected to see this whole thing through with him to the bitter end. I'd never expected him to cash out his chips and leave me in this game all alone. I suddenly felt lost, but knew only too well I had to push that emotion way down deep inside of me.

"Hold the fort. I'll be there as soon as I can. Did George talk to Jack?" "General Thompson is en route as we speak to assume temporary handling of the station until you designate a successor and approve the recommendations that..." he paused trying to make sure he said it correctly, "Dr. Bellamy left behind."

"Thank you, Jami. I am en route. I want a full vid-con set up when I get there with The Group members," I waited for acknowledgment.

"Sir." The phone went dead. I hung up and walked back into the living room. Irina was awake and a light turned on next to the couch illuminated her sleepy face.

"Is everything alright, sweetheart?" She asked, knowing it wasn't.

"No. George just died. I need to head to the Cayman's." I sat back down and pulled on my shoes.

"Does that mean you are now the..." she worked through her words. "The head of the agency?"

"That looks like the size of it. They met and confirmed it a couple of hours ago. New call sign Boss One." I grimaced.

"What can I do to help?" She wrapped the blanket around her.

"You may have to take over Jacobs. I know it's a lot to ask right now. I need someone I can trust with my life," I reached over and held her hand and squeezed it.

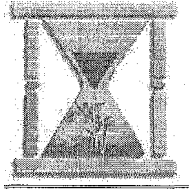
"If you need me, you know I am there. Does this affect the time table?" She started to think like a scientist again and not a rabbit farmer.

"Not much, it just means I have to cover a couple of desks until I can find people I can trust and work with while we finish up the project," I got up and looked for my keys.

"Let me call security at the base. You can't be alone now." She walked into the kitchen and made a call. I heard a drawer open and close as well. She came back holding the two guns we had with us some many years ago on Mount Grace. She handed me one. My old trusty Walther PPK.

"It's still clean and works well. Put it on and don't take it off, for Pasha and my sake." I nodded agreement and pushed it in my belt. I hadn't worn one in a few years and felt somehow uncomfortable carrying one again. I didn't like the idea of using it, but at this point, I would be the one in the crosshairs of every one's scope. I waited for the security escort to arrive and then kissed her good-bye after looking in to see Pasha sleeping in her bed.

I hoped she was going to like Art School in England and I was determined to make sure that school was there when she was ready to go to it.



CHAPTER 45

It took almost twenty hours to arrange for my departure from Jacobs and get The Big Bird to pick me up. I landed in the evening at the private strip on the Caymans with my three plane military escort that Jack arranged to fly chase and pace over me. As we rolled to a halt Jamison was standing next to the ramp beside an open Jeep dressed in his jumpsuit, with a sidearm at the ready.

"Boss." He walked up and I greeted him. I held his hand for a little longer than normal and then threw an arm around him, patting him on the back. We got into the Jeep and started to slowly drive up to the mountain to the monitoring station.

"How long were you with Bellamy?" I asked looking at all the new lights twinkling on the island in the distance.

"Twenty-seven years, since I graduated from Sandhurst and finished SAS training." He moved through the gates and just nodded at the sentries, it didn't seem like anyone was willing to check my papers anymore.

"Any family back home? Wife, lover, anything like that?" I knew I was prying, but I had my reasons.

"Nah, me mum died a few years back and I got an older sister, but she and I never talk. She's only a half-sister by some bloke my mum had an affair with before she married me dad." He worked up toward the top of the island and the view, even at night, was spectacular.

"Any plans? Retirement? You going to open that dirt bike shop in Dorset you always talked about?" I'd heard that story more than once.

"A good plan, but I'd be dealing with civilians. Not my cup of tea really. Don't know right now. Kinda at loose ends, if you know what I mean." He pulled into the complex parking area. "I'll get your bags." He jumped out and grabbed them.

"Put those clown." He did and stood looking at me. "Could you serve me, the way you did George?"

"Oh Boss, that is a tall order. Don't know if I'm the man you need. I'm an old clog that's gray around the muzzle, and not the soldier I once

was." He was being modest to say the least. He didn't have a pound of fat and I wouldn't want to race him in a hundred yard dash,

"I need someone I can trust without question standing behind me. If you want it the job is yours." I waited, letting him think about it.

"You sure, Boss?" He looked really hard at me.

"If you are half as loyal to me as you were to George Bellamy, I will be a happy man, knowing I got you and your boys at my back."

"Boss I don't do nothing in half measures. If I work for you, you got me one hundred and ten percent. The boys as well. We all thought we'd be disbanded and end up as doormen for belching civilians at the Savoy," Jamison actually tried to smile. It didn't work on him.

"New call sign, Black Guard One. Note it in the log and descend the numbers to cover the lads. You lads are now with me, full time. Anybody wants out, now is the time, otherwise this one is for the duration," I picked up my briefcase. "And get some shave tail kid to carry my bags. It's not fitting for a full bird *colonel* to be a bell hop for Christ sakes."

"Sir!" He yelled at one the men next to the doorway that was on the run toward us. "Get the Boss's stuff into his room in the Station and post a guard by his room, 24/7!" The man was flying carrying my two bags.

"With me, Colonel," I walked into the Station and started yet another page in my life.

* * * * *

Jamison put on a headset and flipped a switch in Studio Control.

"Gentlemen, Boss One is now on station." The men on the floor turned and looked at me. Before long, there was slow applause coming in over the speakers, which built into a standing ovation. I recognized a couple of them from being here before. I held up my hands and motioned for silence. I picked up my headset and sat down slowly in Bellamy's spot. Jamison stood behind me.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Please! Note the duty log. There is a controller in the room."

I was interrupted by a voice on the ICU. "Log noted. Boss One is online and functioning."

"Sao Paulo here. Noted and welcome. Jo'Berg ditto. London Center confirms and logged. Madras logged and welcome." The speakers went silent. I took a deep breath.

"I won't say anything about our loss. We all have feelings best kept to ourselves. Note for log," I paused and turned to Jamison, holding my hand over the mouthpiece on the head set. "What the hell is your first name?"

He blushed and squirmed for a second or two. "Percy."

"Your mum hate you or something?" He laughed.

"It was her dad's name, sir," he was still blushing.

"Colonel Percy Jamison is now assistant director of security and goes by the call sign Black Guard One. Note it and log it." I flipped the transmit switch.

"Noted Boss One," the recorder called out.

"Ops, tell me the present situation: near and deep space," I hit the button again and motioned for Jamison to take a seat next to me. He reluctantly complied working the screens that I was unfamiliar with.

"Ops, Boss. Near space is zero, I repeat, zero unknown activity. Deep space monitors have one ripple. Something's out there. It's moving around the outside edge of a rip. Nothing coming through, only gravity waves showing at this time on satellite relays."

"Control, read me the board," I called out. Control was the center position on the floor below me. The man in charge was Red Carlton. He'd been here for years and was the general unity player who could pick up any slack on the floor.

"The board is green Boss. No actions."

"Got it. Sao Paolo you still online and holding the baby?" I waited for the satellite relay to make connections.

"We are here and holding. Boss Four here, Ted. It's Sanchez."

"Good to hear your voice Don Padre. I need to confirm: are you ready?" I hit the switch and watched everyone on the floor hustling like they hadn't expected this activity in the first few minutes of my arrival.

"Holding for confirms."

"I need two confirms, one from Sao Paolo and One from another station in the link."

"Jo'berg is online and awaiting confirm. Ted, this is Angus," the voice was heavy with an Afrikaner accent.

"Is Devilles with you?" I hit the transmit button again.

"Right here, Ted."

"Make it three confirms, log." I switched to the internal communications in the facility for a minute.

"Got it Boss One." The logger noted.

"Carlton, Boss Two this station. Wilkinson, Boss Three this station," I flipped and sat back.

Jamison whistled through his teeth.

"Bad move, Jami?" I asked.

"Not at all, but they may all die of heart attacks on the floor. None of them were prepared for this today," he covered his mouthpiece.

"Sao Paolo confirms and consents."

"Jo'berg confirms and consents, good choice Boss One." Angus added.

"On the ICU internal. Boss Two and Boss Three get your replacement at your desk and get your butts up here, now!" I flipped it off, just as Jack walked into the room in full uniform.

"Howdy, pard," I turned to look at him for a brief second.

"That is what I call administration on the fly. Welcome aboard and all that kind of stuff, Ted."

Jack was standing against the back wall when the other two men walked in and sat down at their respective positions. Jamison had moved back behind me, still on the auxiliary headset.

"How does it feel to have all those pretty stars back on? And so many! Oooo!" I laughed at his new four star cluster on his shoulder.

"Heavy. And from what I see here, maybe premature on my part to think that you had changed," he was watching the two men adjust their headsets.

"Log, note it. It is now officially Old Home Week. Boss Two and Boss Three are on station." I turned to look at my aide now. "Jami make it clear to everyone these men are now running this show. Let the word out, and get it moved clown the line as fast as possible. I want bodies on them full time, bad ass gun fighters, is that clear?"

"Got it Boss. The word will be out in a minute and I will have their assistants ready for them by the time they clear the building." Jamison was already on the phone telling someone to start the process. I hit the all station alert tone and then followed up.

"All stations on the line, understand this as of right now: Our 'friends' will believe that with Boss One, Bellamy, gone we will be in disarray and vulnerable. Nothing could be further from the truth. I want Sao Paolo to hold the baby for another six, I repeat six, days. By then Two and Three should be up to speed. I want three drills a day, with all back up players on consoles, going through the motions and leads watching for screw-ups. What part of this is not understood?" I waited for answers; there were none.

"Two, lock down the facilities for the next six days, everyone there, stays. If they are not in the hole, they don't get in. Confirm and log, on my orders," I clicked off.

"You're expecting a hit?" Jack asked.

"Wouldn't you?" I turned and pushed the reel alert red button behind me on the wall.

"Thirty minutes we are going to phase one, if you need it get it and then be ready, because I'm sealing this place up in twenty nine and counting." I pulled my headset off and walked outside followed by Jack and Jamison.

"What gives?" Jack asked me while pulling out a cigarette and lighting it.

"I thought you gave those things up?" I looked questioningly at him. "I did until a week ago. When Bellamy hinted he wanted me back and then three days ago when I got the call to get a uniform out of moth balls and put these four stars on it." He walked toward the surface exit.

"I need for you to head out to Groom Lake, collect everything you need there and see Riley, he has all the papers for you on the new Squadron. I got it based out of King's Peak. A good facility with underground bunkers for the birds, and the best pilots I could steal from the joint command structure. But get them up to speed. Settle in and I'll be there in about seven to eight days, if I don't have to go to DC. We got a hole in us right now and somebody has to sit at Harv's desk. The guy we have there right now is okay, but he doesn't get the big picture. So I may be delayed. I got Irina back in harness and she is finishing up at Jacobs and whipping Bangor into shape, or at least she will be in the next couple of weeks. I want a test run ready for your guys and the Bug Zapper in less than two months," I paused and took his cigarette and pulled a puff off it. "We need to make sure we don't have any loose lips that are telling our buddies out there we have our pants down and doing the paperwork right now. This alert will scare the hell out of those guys in DC and they'll want to run for cover for the moment. So let's use the time to our advantage. Questions?"

"Can I use the Big Bird?" He smiled at me.

"I won't be using it for the next six days. Have it back by ten and make sure your date is home by then and still a virgin," I slapped him on the back. "God it is good to have you back!" I let him out the side door off the hallway.

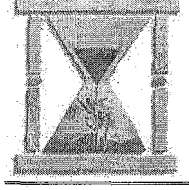
"Jamison!" I yelled. He was on the run up the hall to be at my side. "We got a couple of beers in this joint, before I snap the lid?"

"We will in about three minutes, Boss. Can I call my boys in and use the time for briefing them?" I turned and started to walk away.

"Don't waste my time with questions like that Colonel, I got work to do." I turned and winked at him. He was out the door, yelling into his radio as he ran.

The best way I know to get past a morbid state of bereavement is getting people busy, but this was not an act of kindness on my part.

There was a problem and I wanted to be on top of it.



CHAPTER 46

Twelve days had gone by and I'd spent hours on brutal training and scenarios in the monitoring station. Leads stood behind backups and walked them through every conceivable scenario. Their tails and mine were dragging in the dirt. But I couldn't let up. I spent off hours on the phone with Irina having her work on my secondary problem and she had it in good order by the time I needed it.

All of this had started months before at Harv's funeral at Arlington, when Bellamy and I spent an enlightening hour with Dr. Rufus T. Henry. He'd provided us with timetables and possible future actions. Somewhere in the flow of time, he'd been able to list the actions of those who were unfriendly towards us, and gave me an extremely detailed list. It seemed like someone was directing the 'Visitors' actions from partial information and didn't have the same sources Rufus did. That much was crystal clear to me.

Bellamy was the key. When he died the Visitors were going to try to re-establish their preeminence among Earthly leaders, believing we could not fill the vacuum left behind by one single man's death. It spoke to their soulless, non-creative view of collective mentality and the operation of the Hive. The few Nordic-types that ruled the small Grays used them as pawns in their expansion based plans for our world. The Grays, in their opinion, were throwaway biologic computers that didn't function like other members of the space community. Worker bees, supporting a few drones and a queen in the Hive. It made perfect sense considering what I'd seen of them in action. They were totally mindless in their understanding of us as a race. Their view was simply A to B never asking why.

Rogue elements within the space community were trying to use the Earth as a bargaining chip in their bid for power and they needed us to be subjugated to do that. In the forties and fifties they'd found we had no way to defend ourselves, but all of that had changed because of giants like George Bellamy and Harvey Glipsen. They had, with an unbelievable bravery and courage, set a course for returning our planet to our own

control. We may burn it out or blow it up, but at least it would be by our own actions and not from some outside intruder.

I had spent the first week reading all of Bellamy's private journals. I was aware of his meetings with an alien visitor named "Zinc-Bar" and what they'd discussed. ZB, as Bellamy referred to him, was a "Monitor", like Klaatu with Gort from *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, sort of a cosmic policeman, sent to this sector of the galaxy. His job was to make sure all the protocols were observed, that the playing field was kept even and that no one did anything to cause another space war out there somewhere.

It was clear from Bellamy's comments he'd been only slightly helpful and did more listening than talking. It also appeared he was someone that needed to be watched very carefully if he decided to show up again, since, towards the end of his life, Bellamy admitted that everything ZB had told was not exactly accurate. It had been flavored to suit his personal needs for the information flow to continue on all of our projects. Bellamy had, unknowingly, been one of the leaks, or at least he was at the time I returned to The Group, and assumed leadership at the Jacobs Center. Then it dawned on Bellamy he was being used and he shut down the communications link totally. We all have faults, and Bellamy had his, but his heart was in the right place, just some of his judgments weren't.

"Boss?" Jamison was slowly raising the light level in the room with the dimmer. I'd been sacked out in a chair with a blanket over me in my room, a Bellamy journal still on my lap. I looked at my watch and it was 2:21 AM East Coast time.

"What is it?" I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes.

"Glimmer Man has shown himself!" Glimmer Man was the nickname the main floor techs had given the object flitting around one of the rips in the fabric of space/time. A perfect place to enter our dimension, and close enough to the outer orbit of Pluto to spit on.

"Deep space probe *Achilles* just picked up the signature of a type two craft, then it blinked offline," he said, handing me my black jump suit.

"Hubble got it yet?" I asked crawling in and zipping it up.

"They're re-tasking the number two scope right now and will have visual by the time we hit Studio Control," Jamison held the door for me as I moved very quickly out and up the stairs for Studio Control.

I pulled on my headset and pointed to the chairs next to mine.

"They're being pulled out of bed as we speak," Jamison was on his handheld speaking quietly.

"Wilkinson is coming, but Carlson is in the infirmary under sedation for a migraine," Jamison said quietly behind me as I ran the board and checked everything.

I turned and spoke to him. "Call Jacobs, get Irina on the line and keep her there."

"Working it now, Boss," he used the side phone.

"On the board, Jami, next to me. I won't have time to turn," I was watching the numbers run down the screen, looking at the visual imaging coming up on the big screen on the floor.

"Look alive people, this is not a drill, I repeat, there is no drill!" The movement was incredible below me. Folks were sitting at consoles and back-ups standing two deep. It looked like the whole staff had turned out.

"Sao Paolo, are you online?" I called into the air around me.

"Were here, Control, watching the screen." It was Sanchez. The old man never slept.

"I want a confirmation from one other station, do we have a live one, inbound?" I hit the switch again.

"Confirmed and registered Control. Type two signature, full bore. This is Jo'berg."

I went to internal first as Wilkinson hit his seat and shook himself alive, still in his pajamas.

"Boss Three is on line. People turn and note. Jamison is holding Boss Two's seat until further notice."

"Logged and registered," the voice came back at me by the time I released the push to talk button.

"Boss?" Jamison covered his mouthpiece and spoke to me, with disbelief in his voice.

"Work the problems Colonel. We got a job to do here. You got Jacobs on line for me, yet?" I hit the com-link to all the other stations.

"Colonel Jamison is sitting in Boss Two's position until further notice. Confirm."

"Sao Paolo, Jo'Berg, London Center, Madras." Everyone hit their confirm switches and flooded the board with responses. My own hands were flying over the keyboard.

"I need a probable point of contact or entry," I hit the keys on my computer that repeated the request in binary on the screens for everyone down the line to read.

"Working," I heard Ops call in and watched as three men huddled around a screen and one of them pulled out a handheld calculator.

"Jo'berg here. I make it Paris or London," I hit an automatic response key that flashed on his screen stating I had heard him and was acknowledging his transmission.

"Same entry point. Madras to Control," I hit it again.

"Madras to Control," I hadn't recognized his call the first time so he repeated it.

"Madras, go," I listened in my earphone and hit the switch that put it on the overhead. Wilkinson almost went through the floor not expecting the sound level I had it set at.

"This signature can't be true! If it is, he needs to slow down outside the LaGrange point of Jupiter and I don't see that happening. Madras clear." I punched the button and called to the floor.

"Is he right? Is this guy a straight line shooter?" I called to no one in particular. I saw heads turn and look up at the booth.

"Boss, Ops." I listened and looked at Jamison. He shook his head that we didn't have a confirm yet.

"Go Ops."

"Madras got it before us. Angle and trajectory is saying in two minutes if he doesn't put on some brakes. He's a suicide waiting to happen."

"Registered. Sao Paolo: assessment?" I waited knowing Sanchez would be dead on, as he always had been in the past.

"Sao Paolo Control, One Seven One." I listened and tried to remember the code. Jamison leaned over and spoke while holding his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Private line, circuit three, the blue one."

"Humphrey here"

"Ted, it's Sanchez."

"Don Padre, you wouldn't be calling if it wasn't a problem," my heart was dropping.

"The President is in London at a conference. No one's supposed to know. It's about the Middle East problems and they're hiding away just outside of town at a country house."

"Do you have any other good news for me?" I hit the respond key on my keyboard.

"The Vice President is somewhere in Kansas tonight. He's supposed to be at a town hall meeting and at an opening for a library tomorrow." Don Padre was speaking very fast and his words slurred, but were still clear.

"Is there anybody left in DC?" I knew the answer before I asked.

"No one in control." Don Padre's voice was now cracking.

"Boss Three, get NORAD on the hotline for me, now," I switched back to Don Padre. "Would you be offended if I took complete control on this one?"

"Please, my friend! Let me act as your back up tonight, as always." I hung up and switched to regular COM lines.

"Studio Control to all Stations, Boss One is assuming the Conn, I repeat, Boss One has the baby. Confirm by key stroke," I watched all stations light up.

"On the floor, we got it and it is ours. Now let's work it people! Ops? Has he passed the go/no-go line?"

"Ops. La Grange passed. Speed is increasing."

"Systems! Is he on target for London?"

"Confirmed and logged, London is mark. If he changes course at this speed he will be in fly-by mode."

"Ops, give me an ETA to insertion and impact?" I held my breath.

"Insertion in thirty-one minutes, impact in thirty eight minutes. Weight and type, estimate a two-hundred kiloton blast."

"Ops, start sending us data on the trajectory...NOW!" I yelled into the headset. Jamison touched my arm.

"Irina is in route to Jacobs. Taylor is her back up."

"Great. Let's see if he can do the math like she can. Send him the trajectory. I want it on line in fifteen minutes and jumping in two after that. If he doesn't, I am personally sending you out there to shoot that simple son of a bitch!" I hit the button marked in red after Wilkinson pointed to me.

"This is General Adams, NORAD control."

"Countersign. Alpha Two Four Bravo."

"Again for voice verification."

"Countersign Alpha Two Four Bravo"

"Approved. Go."

"Scramble and go to DEFCON One, right now. Repeat: Def-Con One." I said as calmly as I could.

"Sir! That is a call only the President can make!" He was following his orders.

"I am calling a Whiskey Overlord." Silence on the phone.

"Sir. I am not allowed to take that sign. I can't do that."

"In thirty minutes General I got two tons of non-melting metal traveling at a speed that is going to make England a big hole in the ocean. It will look like a twenty-ton nuke leveled the island. Now, are you going to call it or not?" I hated this part! Dealing with some jag-off more worried about his next star than, oh say, *all life on Earth as we knew it!*

"Online. This is ALICE in Looking Glass," the airborne command and control aircraft was monitoring the alert message and tones.

"Who am I talking to?" I spoke quickly while pounding on the keyboard to get the information to Jacobs.

"General Howard."

"That would be Philip Howard if I am not mistaken?" I wanted this one to work for all of us.

"You know damn good and well it is, Doc! What's happening?" I met him many times during my stay at Groom and he had been Jack's boss before he came over to us.

"I need a Whiskey Overlord, about two minutes ago." I spoke clearly and distinctly, so that the scrambler wouldn't mess up the words going on a free air uplink.

"Sequencing now." The board on the right of the console lit up like a Christmas tree. NORAD was online and running everything up the flagpole.

"Get underground, General. It won't do any good if I can't stop this guy. But they need a chance."

"Are you talking about London? 'Cuz that's what I'm reading on my screen right now."

"You got it," I watched the message start to rapidly burst across the screens in the center downstairs. He was getting everyone in the air.

"I got full scramble from England and Germany, now what?"

"Get them the hell out of there! They won't be any good if they are caught in the EMF wave that's going to follow this hit."

"I am looking right now at the screen and deep space satellites have picked it up. Jesus, Ted! We got nothing up there to stop that thing with!" Howard's voice was crackling with static.

"Ops here, we got twenty-one and counting."

"Logged," I was offline for a minute. "God damn it." My heart was racing in my chest and I had to stop and take a breath.

"Irina!" Jamison hit my console button for me.

"Sweetie! Honey, sorry to wake you up," I waited while she screamed at someone in Russian.

"Yea ne nid em scores! Da se net is sloor!" She yelled.

"In English, baby!" I yelled back over the noise at her end.

"I've got it on track! Give me the number! Where do you want me to hit it?" Irina was sucking air at her end; she must have run from the car to the pit.

"Sending," I hit my keyboard again.

"Ops. Boss. Thompson on red line," we were jammed with calls.

"Control. This is Alice. We're starting the count down on space borne platform to intercept." I listened to him and knew as well as he did it was a wasted effort.

"Rocks off a tank Alice, but try. We are working the numbers on something else," I didn't have time to tell him.

"Ops Boss, I got the President on Blue for you, what do you want me to do?" He was on the floor jumping up and down waving a handset.

"Talk to him! Ask him how London is this time of year. I got work to do!" I hit another button.

"You ready, sweetheart?" I listened very carefully.

"Counting, seven, six, faver, farve, treba, amare! Engaged!" Irina yelled, mixing Russian and English.

"Scram the screens! I repeat: all stations scram your screens," I hit the override in Studio Control and everything went offline that was looking at space.

"Holy mother of God! What is that?" I heard the open line from Alice in my ear. I waited in silence for ten seconds then lit my monitors back up.

"Give me input people," I spoke more slowly with a slight slur, feeling the pain run down my left arm. Sweet Jesus Christ! I was having a heart attack. NO! Not now! I had to hang on just a bit longer, as the world hung in the balance on what I did next.

"Palomar in California just reported a massive explosion on the other side of Mars. So did Kitt Peak in Arizona," I heard a voice in my ear.

"Identify for logging, god damn it!" I yelled again. I knew Jamison was watching me closely. If he suspected what was happening with me he'd pull me off station, and if that happened, we were all doomed. I had to keep going right now even though the pain was incredible!

"Logged."

"Sao Paolo, we are showing clear sky. I repeat, clear sky!"

"Jo'Berg, ditto."

"London center ditto."

"This is Alice, Control. May I shut down and reduce from DEFCON One?"

"Affirmative Alice and...thank you!"

"No, thank you Dr. Humphrey! I don't know what you just did, but it fried every one of my onboard sky cameras. Alice is clear and back on NORAD control channel."

"Situation to Boss One," I hit the key with my right hand.

"Go."

"We are calling the situation, I repeat; we are calling the situation. Awaiting your confirmation."

"Confirmed. Situation is clear. Sao Paolo," I took a deep breath, "please take the baby from us."

"Sao Paolo, we got it, Boss One. Good job, Ted!"

"Boss let me get a medical team in here now," I nodded and he hit his panic button on the console.

"Irina? Is the baby home safely?" I asked trying to hold it together.

"Singed but whole. Number was two of ten. I repeat: number was two of ten. Twenty percent power did the trick on the laser," Irina waited.

"I will call you back when this is over," I said trying to sound okay.

"Ted, is it over?" She sounded worried.

"Not just yet, baby. I love you. Control out."

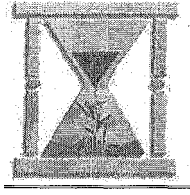
I didn't wait. I disconnected the line and sat back as Wilkinson jumped out of his seat and looked at me.

"Earn your keep for Christ sakes and talk to the President," I pointed to the still flashing blue line.

I motioned for Jamison to help me up and get me out into the hallway. He did, reluctantly, and suddenly the hallway elongated and tilted like a circus funhouse in a bad horror movie. I heard my head crack against the wall as I hit it with my forehead as my face slid clown the smooth metal ending with a dull thud on the thin carpet.

Later I learned Jamison snatched me up off the floor and carried me at a full tilt run to the infirmary.

He wasn't waiting for anyone to come to us.



CHAPTER 47

"Hold on there, Dr. Humphrey," the young Navy doctor was pushing me back down into the hospital bed.

"I have work ... to do..." I weakly glanced over at the IV tubes in my arm.

"Not just yet. Not until we have a talk." He pulled a chair next to the bed and hit a button on the side that raised me up to a reclining position.

"Okay give it to me quick. First, how long have I been out?" I worried about Irina and the others.

"Not long. About six hours," he looked at his watch as he took my pulse.

"Heart attack?" I asked not wanting to hear the truth.

"Not lucky enough, but it resembles a heart attack. Acute Hyper Stress; AHS. Caused by too much work, pressure and not breathing enough during periods of high anxiety. Which, I understand from Colonel Jamison, you just went through tonight, "he got up and looked into my eyes with his small flashlight, " which I know nothing about as all that stuff is classified way above my paygrade. What I do know is your blood pressure came down alright, blood tests show you're in pretty good health for a man of your age. No clots, occlusions or tumors in the brain. You drove yourself past the breaking point just pure and simple and your system shut down. I've seen this before in this place," he got up, walked over and turned the lights up a little higher. "But you need to slow up on yourself and others. I've treated a half dozen people this week for similar complains. This place is a killer if you don't manage it right."

"Doctor, don't lecture me. I have a job to do," I swing my legs off the bed, but the doctor stopped me and pushed me back down and I was too weak to put up a fight

"I understand that very well. But I just lost the last Boss around here and I don't plan to lose another one in the near future. I was told you pulled off a near miracle tonight, but that won't count for much if you are not here to do it again when we need you."

He handed me a small vial of pills. "Use these when it gets really bad. They're an anxiety controller not sedatives, but that'll help regulate your system when you're running at warp ten."

I took the pills and looked at the little orange tablets in the bottle.

"Can I get up and get going now...please?" I added for his sake.

"Sleep for about five more hours and then you are good to go. You need some rest and I am going make sure you get it." He injected something into my arm and patted it.

"That will knock you out for a few hours and when you wake up you'll feel fine." He started to walk out and stopped. "Boss Two told me to tell you he ordered everyone to stand down and is using minimum staff at present. Said you needed to know that." He smiled and left. I felt the drug surging through my system. I wanted to fight it but couldn't. I drifted into not a deep sleep as I expected, but a bright and colorful altered state of conscious.

* * * *

I was walking in a garden, filled with flowers. I rubbed my hands over them and felt the pollen come off in sparkling vibrant little clouds. The fragrance was almost overpowering. I saw a stream ahead of me running down a waterfall of stones and it bubbled as the water played frothily with the rocks to make a gentle melody. I sat down on the downey soft kelly green grass and looked into the crystal sparking water. I dipped my hand in the water and felt an electric, loving vibrance flow through me. I knew I had never been here before.

"Hello, Teddy," I turned and saw a vibrant young black man walk up and sit down next to me on the grass.

"Rufus?" I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Yup. It's me. I like this body better when I'm here. Makes me feel younger, somehow," he laughed that big, open laugh. It was Rufus all right.

"Where are we?" I looked around and noticed the yellowish tint of the sun filtered through a haze.

"Oh this is just a place I spend some of my time. Thought you might like to join me here for a little while." He picked a flower and held it to his nose and smiled.

"This must be a dream." A thought floated up in my mind that just wouldn't come to the surface.

"No, not really. It's just a state between time and worlds. This place exists a long ways from your body lying in that hospital room back on Earth. But there is another part of you that is here with me," he handed me the flower.

"I don't understand," I was trying to find the reference plane in which I was working and couldn't.

"Oh, it isn't anything to concern yourself with. Mystics all over the galaxy know about it. They talk in funny terms making them sound like they're smarter or weirder than other people, but this is a transcendental state, that can be explained using quantum physics. One of these clays folks will realize that and make some great leaps forward in using it. But for right now, this here place belongs to just me," he laughed and got up.

"And a choice few special guests. Come on along now son, I want to show you something."

We walked through the flowers to a small cottage and went inside. It was comfortable and classic, like an old English study. The walls were lined with bookshelves holding rows of beautiful leather bound books with titles embossed in gold leaf. He motioned to one of two red leather comfortable armchairs for me to sit next to the hearth with the roaring fire. He picked a book from the shelf and sat in the other chair.

"I was reading all about what you did today. Very good, Ted! You showed them you got the brains, guts, knowledge and, most important, the balls to beat these bastards. They won't try that again for a long time," he read down the page.

"Is that a...history book of some kind?" I was confused.

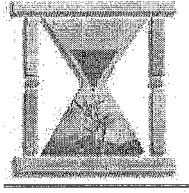
"It is, but like nothing you've ever seen. Some fancy mystics call it the Akashic Records. For me they manifest as the library in my study. I just wanted to tell you that all of this is just about over. All you gotta do is get through one more problem and you've done your bit for Mankind." He smiled and closed the book. "Ted, you learned something a long time ago. Now you need to remember it again. You learned that your father believed in reversals. Just remember that, reversals, and you'll be all right. *Reversals* ..."

"Reversals. Yes! Reversals. He did use them," I was speaking and being shaken at the same time. Rufus smiled as the study and the books and the fire just melted like a watercolor in the rain.

"Boss! Wake up, you're dreaming!" Jamison stood over me looking down. "You okay? The doctor said I could wake you up and get you going again." He looked worried.

"I just met a twenty-one year old middle aged woman, and she had just said yes, damn it all!" I awakened fully, sat up and swung my legs off the bed and looked around. It was the same sterile hospital room I'd been in a few hours ago.

"I will remember to tell the other Dr. Humphrey about that," Jamison smiled. He helped me to my feet and I started to come back to this world and this way of life.



CHAPTER 48

I spent the next days and nights working out the last few problems with the personnel and then decided they could handle the day-by-day operations. I re-established the one-clay-on and three-days-off sequence so everyone on every station could have some kind of normal lives again.

Jamison, two of his boys and I, all headed back to DC. I knew I had to clean up the desk that Harv used to sit at and find someone that could truly handle it. I wasn't ready yet to give Carlson and Wilkinson full admittance into The Group, but left them as temporary acting Bosses. I figured that after several months we, as a group, would re-evaluate their performance and see if they had the right stuff to make full-fledged members. They didn't know about all the other stuff we did, technically or politically, and I wanted to leave it that way. Don Padre Sanchez in Sao Paulo agreed with me, as did the heads of the other stations, but still it gave us operational capacity at the Cayman Station in case of another incident.

I had half a dozen conference calls with Irina and her group at Jacobs and we went through all of the procedures and made some improvements if we needed a rapid launch of the Bug Zapper again.

It had worked perfectly, delivering a deathblow to the incoming ship and only suffered minor burns in the process. Next time, I knew we'd crank the power setting up higher and stand off at more of a distance to do the job.

The device at Jacobs performed its function perfectly, teleporting the unit in real time from one spot to another. We still hadn't tried it yet for a time jump and that was sitting on my list of things that needed doing and testing. But I wanted to be there when we pulsed that one.

To my amazement Jamison was like a walking computer, along with all of his other skill sets. He could call up a phone number, a record from the file and names at random without ever referring to any notes. It was total recall by his near-photographic memory. If he'd read it or seen it, he had it in his head somewhere. This became indispensable to me in the next few weeks in Washington. Having him with me was like still possessing a large piece of Bellamy. I talked to Don Padre on the side and

confirmed that Jamison should be included on the active list of The Group and received full conferment to take that action. Jamison was now totally one of us and he rose to the occasion. He was not only an excellent soldier, but unequaled at administration and had a very strong grasp on all of the technical details surrounding The Group's activities.

Within a very short period of time he was becoming my right hand. For that I was truly grateful, as it didn't seem so lonely where I was now. We had sent the current occupant of Harv's desk on a road trip to conduct evaluations of needed equipment. General Thompson got him out of the picture with a wink and a nod between Jamison and myself that he'd get a posting someplace far from the center and be used at a level more fitting to his personality.

Jamison arranged for a floor of apartments for all of us on 30th Street, about a half mile from the Old Executive Office Building, which had its own internal security and because several Senators lived in the building they had Secret Service checking it every half hour or so.

It was modern, nice and had a great view of the city.

My days were spent in the conference center on the video units, talking to Irina or Jack or a half dozen other people all trying really hard to finish up the major programs and minor projects that needed to be in place before the first series of test runs commenced next year.

The details mounted up to a mountain of paperwork, tens of millions of bytes on the computer screens and a phone permanently hooked to my head. From six am to nine at night, I sat in Harv's old chair and played at being an administrator and head of the most powerful group of men in the world. Just to protect our investments and personnel in various locations and to keep our profile below the surface, I had to deal with toppling governments in South America, buying off news organizations, covering up for stupid mistakes and all the time trying to manage the world's most secret projects. The leaves on my desk calendar keep being torn off and I had little time for my family or myself for that matter.

I expanded our office space to eight instead of three rooms to make room for Jamison and his boys. The guys at GAO started to raise hell but were soon quieted down by the man across the street in the White House.

It had been three months since the night of the "incident" when Jamison stuck his head into my office and waited for me to look up from my mountain of files.

"Boss, you got a visitor," he said very quietly.

I looked at him after looking at my appointment book and shrugged not understanding who would be here.

"The President wants to see you," he said, still in a hushed tone. "Christ, Jami! What? I don't have time go all the way over there! Tell that. . ."

Jamison stopped me just in time. "No! He's here!" He opened the door and stepped back to let the tall man walk into the room.

"Ted, thank you for seeing me." He came and shook my hand while I still had a surprised look on my face and sat down removing his gloves.

"Mr. President. To what do I owe this honor?" I couldn't imagine what he wanted.

I noticed the milling men standing outside the office and knew his Secret Service detachment was out there. Jamison had his boys guarding the door to protect their investment and meal ticket, namely, me, glaring into the sunglass covered eyes of the Secret Service men.

"Well, I think we got off on the wrong feet originally and I hadn't seen you at any of our briefings in the Situation Room." He said in that charming, whispery Arkansas drawl. "Harv used to show up now and then to just check in and I was hoping you would pick up that habit as well. I'd just like to know what my people are doing." I let it pass. He was trying to make an implication that we somehow worked for him, but we both knew differently and there was no reason to antagonize him by stating the obvious.

"I get the reports every morning and I haven't really seen anything you need our expertise with right now," I played along, but still found I didn't like being in the same room with him.

"Well, Clifford, my aide, told me, that the Senator from the State of Washington is raising all kinds of hell in committee meetings that the work being done at Bangor is being contracted outside Washington State, and she wants to know why. It's causing us some problems with one of our bills that we really need to get through. She's telling some folks she is going to hold up the bill, if we don't start handing out some contracts to her folks up there." He pulled out a cigar, lit up and sat back, blowing smoke up towards the ceiling. I raised my hands as though I didn't understand what he wanted from us. I did, but he needed to spell it out.

"Come on, Ted! Help us out on this one. You saved our ass in England otherwise that school boy would be running the country. I can't say I approved of your handling of those other files in OKC, but it got it off them off the screen as sure as hell and I got miles of political juice out of it to boot. So, I need another favor. Besides, that operation up there is yours and you guys can afford to be a little helpful. I got a re-election campaign in full swing and I need all of the support I can get right now." He puffed away.

I hit the button on my console. Jami walked in and stood at attention, his normal form when anyone was present in my office.

"Sit down, Colonel," I motioned to the couch.

"I don't think I know you," the President stood and extended his hand. Jami shook it and sat down without saying anything. He looked hard and professional.

"Colonel P. W. Jamison. SAS commander and a senior member of The Group." I waited for the full effect of the statement to sink in.

"Were using British officers?" The President was actually thrown by this one.

"Scottish, sir. But, yes, I served in the British military," Jamison corrected.

It was the comment about "Senior Member of The Group" that made the politician's cunning eyes narrow. It was one thing to have American scientists and generals calling the shots, but to have a British, or Scottish, Senior Member was something he was not prepared for.

"Which bill?" I picked up my pen.

"What?" The President looked back at me, not sure what I meant. "The bill you are having problems with and want to get through the Senate?"

"The United Nations Supported Bio-sphere bill. It'll set aside areas of bio-diversity for future generations." He was concentrating again on the subject, but had noted he needed to find out something about Jami. I thought, good luck. The man didn't exist on paper anywhere, except inside files I controlled, and that was the way it was going to stay.

"Harold..." I couldn't remember the Senator's name on the committee and I snapped my fingers.

"I know the one, Boss," Jami answered.

"Call him and have him push the bill through today. Get it to the floor and have Lacture push it through without delay by tonight. Have them rearrange their schedules. Then ask Poppy to leak the information to the Washington Post that the President was instrumental in getting the compromised and expanded version approved, over conservative's desire to use something as good as this bill as a political tool to further their cause of obstructionism," I rattled off.

"I think I can tone it down a little, but yes. I will have it done within the hour." Jamison got up and nodded curtly to the President and left.

The President looked dumbfounded and put his cigar into my glass ashtray. He sat for a minute and looked at me.

"That's it? You tell your aide to do that, and it gets done?"

"He is not my aide," I said bristling. "He is my equal. And yes; that is the way I do things." I was really getting bored with this guy's over inflated delusions of self-importance, as we all knew that he was just a meat suit puppet of other forces that did not concern us.

"Who exactly in the government do you guys work for? I know I have a pretty thick file on your little 'Group'," he said with his slight southern

drawl, implying he didn't care for us, fully. "But all it tells me, is that I can't touch you guys. What exactly is your purview in all of this?"

"Need to know basis, sir. And you are not on that list." I had to throw that punch. I just couldn't help myself. I knew he'd asked to know two things when he became President: what really happened at Roswell in 1947, and who shot his boyhood hero John F. Kennedy. He was told the same thing I was telling him now. That he was just a temporary public servant; he did not need to know, and that his clearance and classification levels were not high enough. I know it pissed him off then and I knew it would piss him off now.

"You listen to me you cock sucking son of a bitch!" He leaned forward ominously, squinting his eyes and pointing his thumb over his clenched fist at me. "I am the President of the United fucking States, and I am not used to being spoken to like this by some science geek with some letters behind his name and builds toys at the taxpayer's expense!" He was getting into his famous state of rage, trying to prove who the better man in the room was.

I tossed a file in front of him with the photographs in it of him and a certain Presidential aide. All in glorious *film noir* black and white pulled off his own security cameras inside the White House. It showed the entire deed, stained blue dress and all. And, my God, I smiled to myself; he had rotten taste in women. I gave him a moment to peruse the file, watched his face go purple as he turned apoplectic with sheer unadulterated rage, then I let him have it.

"Sir, I have worked with nine Presidents, three Prime Ministers, seven dictators of the Soviet Union, twenty despots in third world countries and one ex-wife. I don't plan to explain to you now or ever what it is that I do or what The Group does. You are over there," I pointed toward the White House, "for a very short period of time. But like every other man that has sat in this office, I will be here doing what I must do, and you will live with it and not interfere.

"That is the short version," I leaned forward for emphasis. "Most people who assume power understand we are here, to make sure the power structure that is in place, and which you are temporarily part of, survives." I waited for his reaction. He was still holding the file and looking at the pictures that no one would want to have their voters see.

"And I guess you are threatening to give these to the press?" He smirked, thinking that was no threat at all.

"No." I said, and paused for effect. "To your wife."

The smirk melted away, and a brief look of sheer terror crossed his face. It took a while for him to finally regain his composure, but I had driven in the dagger far enough and twisted it on a bone. He got the

point. "You are a lot worse than I was made to believe by Harvey, aren't you?" He looked up at me and closed the file, laying it back on my desk.

"I run this organization. I report to no one but me. If anything were to happen to me, or that man out there, two thousand like him will paint a mural on the walls of the White House in blood, and no one could stop them. I have five-star generals that just say 'yes sir' to me. I have foreign leaders who will kill their own populations if I tell them to. I control the most awesome weapons arsenal this world has ever seen. You saw an example of that when you were in England. That wasn't the Air Force that saved your ass, or the Navy, the Army, the Marines or the Girl Scouts. That was me. Me and the men that stand with me. If you think I am worse than you believed, you have no idea of the reality.

"I don't like you as a person, and I think you are an awful human being. But right now I have no beef with you," I leaned into him for menace and effect, "and believe you me, you do *not* want to have a beef with me. It is my job to protect you and the rest of this planet. So you should work on your re-election campaign and go about your business in a quiet and dignified manner. You are, after all, you are the '*fucking*' President. ...and I mean that in the most literal sense, although, by your antics and behavior, you have no respect whatsoever for your office, the people around you, our country or this world for that matter. But that is not my business. So, you bang as many interns on your desk as you like. That is your business. I won't interfere with you. But I am warning you, *sir*... you make one more trip over here like this and try to play some kind of brinkmanship game with me and you will be on the lecture circuit hocking your book, explaining what it's like to be a one term President so fast it'll make your dick twist to the right."

I sat back and looked at him across the table, then added, "You want to call my bluff, go ahead. I will show you what power really is."

He leaned back, put his tongue in his cheek and that evil Cheshire cat grin came over his face again. "You are just a little man, in a little office who does not have any idea what I am capable of, you..."

I hit the button on the intercom. A mechanical sounding voice came online.

"Awaiting your orders, Mr. Director."

"Take down the main NORAD communications system grid for one minute. On my mark." The shit-eating grin slid from the President's face. "Mark." I released the button.

Buzzing phones and a panicked bustle began in my outer office. Ten seconds later a knock came on the door and one of the Secret Service men rushed in.

"Ah, Mr. President? I just received a call that all of our strategic defense systems just went off-line."

The President didn't blink, and continued to stare right at me, his eyes narrowing. "Where?"

"World-wide, sir. I think you need to get back to the White House stat, Mr. President!" The man had his hand on his gun in the holster attached to his belt.

The President waved him away like Caligula dismissing a slave. "Wait outside." The Secret Service man looked confused, but did as he was told. "Point made. Well played. I don't think I like you much either, Dr. Humphrey. I don't think you are good for this country." He was still trying to get some parity, even though we both knew he'd lost all the chips in front of him, and the ranch to boot, on that last hand. Jamison walked in and stood, waiting.

"Yes, Colonel?" I asked him.

"The bill is out of committee and heading to the floor of the Senate. It should take about an hour, with some posturing, but it will pass by three and the Senate Majority Leader would like a photo opportunity over at the White House with the President as he signs the bill into law." Jamison looked at his watch.

I bowed and waived my hands in the air like a magician that had just performed a mind-blowing trick and was waiting for the audience to applaud.

"Ta-Da." I said flatly. "Now, if there is nothing else then, Mr. President, have a nice day. Colonel, if you would be so kind as to show the President out." I never got up, or looked up, as I started working through the papers on my desk again. The tall, bulky man walked outside and smiled for everyone and went down the hallway toward the elevator. Jamison came back in and sat down.

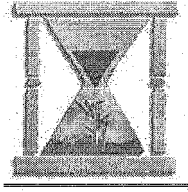
"Did you listen in?" I smiled at him.

"Pouncy bastard. The guy needs to be whacked just on principle, you know that don't you?" Jamison almost spit his words out.

"Oh, we won't need to do a thing. In time he'll hang himself. The next three or four years he'll be ass deep in problems."

I pointed at the file and Jamison looked at it for the first time with a big grin.

"Cute little gal, ain't she?" Jamison snorted, taking far too long reviewing the documents and I laughed out loud at his Scottish taste in women.



CHAPTER 49

It had taken another three and half months to get the DC office running smoothly again. I hadn't realized what an effect Harv had on the operations. The man must have been working twenty hours a day. There was no wonder why, when he went on trips, he drank like a fish and ate like a horse. I actually lost weight while in DC. I couldn't stand that much take-out and not one of us that lived in the apartments could cook worth a damn.

I started searching for a new director for the Washington office as soon as I arrived and found that one of Jamison's boys was a good candidate. Robert Mitchell-Hedges, a distant cousin of the great adventurer of the twenties and thirties in Central America who had discovered the famed Crystal Skull. He graduated with honors and a double major from Oxford, then went on to Sandhurst and received his commission. He was a Major who served a stint in Northern Ireland and then been picked up by Bellamy. We called them "The Lads", but Bob, as everyone called him to his own disapproval, was almost forty, well educated, charming and tough. After a long and formal review, Jamison and I decided he would serve as the director for The Group in DC without being made part of the inner circle, at least not just yet.

I spent a lot of time on conference calls between Jacobs and the new underground base at King's Peak in Utah, the current unofficial top-secret HQ for the US Space Command, all under Jack's management.

It was time for a full-blown conference and we needed all the players in place. I decided we should meet at the new submarine facility at Bangor to get the guided tour and use the new conference room. It was a logistical nightmare so I reluctantly moved it back to Jacobs and decided I'd head up to Bangor and witness the first jump from there, when we were ready and let that suffice. I didn't have any desire to be buried alive again under the desert in Fallon, Nevada. But some things we just can't control in our lives.

* * * * *

The conference room was set up for about twenty-five people. Other members of The Group would be on closed circuit video links and have the ability to ask questions and receive answers.

I'd taken the "Dulce Silver Case File", as it was now known among some of us, and compiled it into a detailed report that was given to everyone before the conference with all the calculations that Metrics Division had done on it. Everything seemed ready and so was I.

Irina and I drove in together with Jamison and one of his lads in a car behind us. They used the spare bedroom in our house the night before and Irina gave us all a good old fashioned home cooked meal. If I let them, they would have moved in permanently just for the food.

"We need to get to the photographers by five. He's working late for us and Pasha wants you and I in one of her pictures in her graduation gown," Irina said and I stopped in the hallway. "I know, I know! Your future is my past. I've never shown her that picture. It's safely locked up." I was silent as we continued.

The room was filled with white-coated men and women, all with clipboards and files under their arms. Jack Thompson was there in a summer uniform with two aides. Jamison and I looked so out of place in our three-piece suits, I felt like a complete geek amongst real scientists.

I was actually embarrassed at the applause as I walked into the conference room and motioned for them to stop, which they didn't. "Alright, enough already. No one is getting a raise, except my wife!" Good-natured boos filled the room.

"As most of you know, this has been a long uphill road and we're only here today because of a lot of hard work on your part and those that have come before us. This project doesn't belong to any one single person. It never would have happened if a lot of folks hadn't given their all and some of us here today, have given much more than duty calls for," I motioned to Jack who nodded to me, as did Irina. "I never liked those long winded guys that give political speeches, but I have become one of them and that is just too bad, because I've spent thirty years getting ready to make this speech and all of you are going to listen to it and you are going to enjoy it. That is an order." They laughed and clapped.

I let the room settle down. "Good work, folks. The future will probably never know what you have done here. But those of us that do, will never forget," I paused and everyone was silent. "I would like to ask Dr. Irina Humphrey to conduct the briefing," I gestured for her to get up and she had to deal with the applause now.

"I will try to do this without reverting to my native tongue," she blushed.

"No way, you can't do it!" One of the scientists heckled to the hoots and howls of the rest of them. "Especially the part about my ancestry and my mother's sexual preferences!" Again hoots. Everyone knew when Irina was mad, the language she used would frightened a Russian sailor.

She waved them into silence. "All right! Let's get down to business." She pulled out her black frame horn rimmed glasses as a screen dropped from the ceiling. She stepped to the podium as the lights dimmed and the display began.

"We have all the components of the Project: Tempus Fugit jump system, and the Time Runner, in place. We have not yet tried it, but we plan to this month. We have worked out all of the bugs for a standard jump that we can accomplish anywhere within local space, without a time drag at all. But deep space and anywhere outside the unique gravity and morphogenic field of Earth, is still a new adventure for all of us. The Bug Zapper is working perfectly and we have made three test jumps with it and one operational one." She paused reading her notes. Everyone was aware we'd taken out a planet killer with the ease of swatting a fly and they all thought that had proven the system beyond anyone's expectations.

"We're well aware that we now can make a jump without creating another rip in the time and space continuum of local space. If the calculations are correct, we should be able to start shutting up what we have been calling 'rips', 'rifts', or just 'holes', for all these years," she paused and took a drink of water.

"We have been able to detect six of them. Only three are currently usable for the 'Visitors' to drop through. Otherwise, they have a long trip and no one thinks that they are going to make it, without the holes. We plan to close the three major rips first and then the minor ones after that. That is step one. Step two is the deployment of the first monitor on this course line," she used her red laser marker to point to the chart projection and showed it in relationship to the Earth, which *seemed* like a long way out there. "The monitor will only deploy for a few seconds and its function is to see how much of a trail is left behind by the supposed fleet of invaders. From that Metrics can determine approximately how many craft are heading in our direction, without them picking up the unit on their sensory arrays," she paused, "we hope.

"After we have laid in the plots to their exact course we can start sending intercept units to destroy as many of their ships as possible and hopefully dissuaded them from continuing on their current course with and dissuade them of their designs on us. If all of this goes off without a hitch, we should be done with the offensive portion of our mission, in two years." She looked up over her glasses for questions. One of the scientists raised his hand.

"And if the Bug Zapper doesn't do the trick?"

Jack stood up. "Dr. Humphrey, if I may?"

"Go ahead, General Thompson," Irina sat down, relieved.

"The Xerxes ETS Unit is fully operational and by the time their fleet could be nearing our solar system I'll have fifty-one ships that will be able to discourage them in force. We aren't the frontline. You good people are, but the other Dr. Humphrey up on stage has made sure we have a backup and a fail-safe," Jack sat back down.

Everyone had read the briefing paper and knew the Xerxes was able to handle anything that came into the atmosphere for the last year and had proven it a few times. We had other plans to build bigger ships with greater weapons capacity, but I didn't even want to think about that just yet.

"Anything else?" Irina said from her chair. "No?" She motioned for me to come back up.

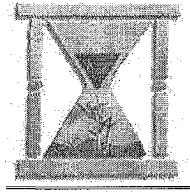
"Alright, I'd like to see the first test in sealing the space/time rift on Friday. I'll be in Bangor to make sure those folks are back up to speed. Good work people! Now let's go have a drink! They're all on me tonight!"

A hearty cheer rose up as they all got up.

I'd arranged a reception in one of the other conference rooms and Jamison made arrangements with the base kitchen to do up something special for all of them. It was an awesome five star spread. They needed a party.

So did I, but not yet.

I had one more problem to deal with.



CHAPTER 50

After having my photograph taken with my daughter and Irina for Pasha's high school graduation, Jamison and I were on the Big Bird heading for the bucolic landscape of the Bremerton National Airport, the closest long strip that could handle our aircraft. It was a thirty-minute drive from there up to the Bangor Sub Base and the new facility, hiding back in the woods.

The facility, after long years of pain and suffering, was finally finished and everything was working in good order. It had a small team of technicians and scientists that had been there since the start. They had a laid back attitude that pretty much fit the land around them, filled with evergreens and water. Tennis shoes and open collars were the dress code of the place, so they would blend into the surroundings on the naval base.

Bill Lancaster headed up the team, who was an old timer that had worked for me at Groom years before. It was good to see him as he took Jamison and I on the \$2.00 tour. I might have sweated and paid for this place, but it was his baby and he was proud of it.

After meeting the people and seeing all the controls and overrides in the system and actually looking at the pit and the gadget in it, I was convinced we were ready. I asked Bill to use an office to make sure everything else was up and working at the other stations and make the final adjustments for tomorrow's first "seal job" of the major rift in the space/time continuum. It would finally be the beginning of the end for those using it to travel and terrorize us from out of deep space, of dimensions and the time stream.

I had just gotten off the phone with Irina and Jack when the phone rang again. I picked it up without thinking. "Dr. Lancaster's office. May I take a message?"

I waited, listening to dead air. I was going to hang up, when I heard crackling static and a feminine voice wafting up from it. Soft and faint, sounding hesitant, like a timid ghost from far away.

"We have met...a couple of times and both of them were...unfortunate, Dr. Humphrey...but I think we should see each other

before you ... throw that switch ...tomorrow." I quickly motioned to Jamison to pick up the other line.

"Who is this?" I waited, but I knew, as the hair prickled on the back of my neck.

"You won't be able to trace this call.. .if that is what you are stalling...for, I have made sure of that. This is...Ann Corbett... and I would like to speak with you ... alone." My blood ran cold in my veins. Somehow they knew what we were doing, and it was, for them, something unthinkable: closing up the time/space holes they had used with impunity for so long to come and go.

"Where and when, Dr. Corbett?" I masked my own fear.

"There is a little place in... Silverdale, called ... Stewart's in Old Town ...a diner. ..I will be there in an... hour. I suggest you do... the same... and come...ALONE...if you ...really know what's...good for you and those.. IDIOTS ...that work for you!"

The line went dead. I placed the receiver back on the cradle. I looked up at Jamison knowing he was ready to call out the Marines and have Silverdale reduced to ash.

"What are you planning, Boss?"

"I am going to meet her, what else? This has gone on for too long. It's time it all comes to a finish, one way or another!" I got up and slammed the file in front of me shut. Jamison just shook his head.

"Boss, this is a really bad idea."

I set my jaw, pulled out my cell phone and punched in a couple of numbers. "I want a car in front right now, and two back up teams ready to move in five minutes. All in civilian clothing and armed to the teeth," I didn't wait for an answer.

"I don't like it, Boss!" He was livid. "These people have been able to study you your entire life! If they really are from the future, don't they already know what's going to happen? Isn't it all a foregone conclusion? They know you'll react this way! Not rationally, but emotionally!"

"I know, but this is something I have to do. I think you know why," he saw the crazy, obsessed look in my eyes, and Jamison knew this was a fight he wasn't going to win. I reached out and asked him for his sidearm. He hesitated then handed it to me.

"Spread the team out around the place. I want you inside, but don't shoot anybody that just happens to move," I tucked the gun into my waistband and remembered Death Valley. I hoped I was meeting a human and not someone who could pull the clip out of this gun without me knowing it.

* * * * *

We drove towards town and I found the spot, driving by it twice, while our people moved into various locations. There was a huge plate glass window in front emblazoned with "STEWART'S. GOOD FOOD. GOOD PRICES. GOOD PEOPLE." It was in a gold, shadowed 1890s script, and the window let me see almost everything going on in the restaurant, which was moderately busy, with customers waiting by the door to be seated. Satisfied that I'd given everyone enough time to move into position, I finally parked the car and walked in alone.

A nice young man was behind the counter, obviously Stewart, a big man in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts, joking with one of the customers at the bar. They were cracking stories about some gal that worked for Stewart and she was blushing. He looked up when I came in, just as a table opened up and a busboy cleaned it up.

"Have a seat," Stewart hollered over, gesturing to the now clean, empty table. He waved at the waitress and she scurried over and handed me a menu. "We got a special on the Deli Delight today, ham and cheese grilled with cabbage." He pointed again to an open chair. The table was near the corner of the plate glass window. I saw Jamison sitting at the other end of the window facing the door, pretending to eat some kind of sandwich.

"Coffee, black." I said to the waitress with a smile. I sat at the table with my back to the door right at the edge of the window where it joined back into the wall with a supporting beam. It let Jamison and I cover the place looking both directions.

Stewart came over with steaming coffee in a generously sized heavy bottomed ceramic black mug with the Stewart's logo in gold letters on the front.

"How are you, partner?" Stewart said, setting the coffee down. "Sure you don't want something else?"

I shook my head and put some Sweet & Low into my cup and stirred it. Another group of boisterous people came in and waited in a clump in the foyer at the door for a vacant table. A man in a heavy plaid coat and jeans, a woman in a red dress, another brunette with a reel and gold scarf with a blue knit hat, and a stout man with reddish hair and beard in a Seattle Seahawks sweatshirt. They must have been regulars, as they waved at Stewart and the waitress.

I went back to my coffee and saw Jamison focus and stiffen. I spun back towards the door, and, standing just behind the group in the shadows, I could make out the burning, baleful eyes of Simon Ratterman. He pushed his way through the group, bumping into the woman in the reel dress, the girl with the scarf and hat, and the men in the plaid jacket and Seahawks sweatshirt. His eyes darted around the room as he moved to

the table in short, sharp motions. The rat-faced man with the hotly gleaming beady eyes silently slid into the chair across from me. I'd seen him before, a couple of times in photos and, of course, our meeting at Groom Lake a long time ago. I still had the scar from the cigarette burn.

Simon Ratterman! In the flesh! But not in some time phased alternate universe reality. He hunched forward, glaring at me with a hatred and malice I had never experienced before in my life. I tried to retain my composure, knowing this all had to be some kind of trap.

"No Ann Corbett, Simon?" I said looking around. "Sweet young thing that she is! Thought she went everywhere with you? Losing your touch with the ladies?" I spoke just loud enough for Jamison to hear.

"Shut up!" He said quietly. "She is across the street with her finger on the trigger of a high sniper powered rifle with that ape of yours behind me in the cross-hairs. If he so much as breathes hard she's going to put a .50 caliber slug through his head."

Ratterman pulled a .38 Colt Cobra Detective Special revolver from his jacket, devastating at close range, and flashed it before pointing it at me under the table. I saw Jamison make a slight movement that would have been imperceptible to anyone who didn't know him. I raised my palms up just above the table to show Ratterman I was unarmed, and to stop Jamison.

"It's okay," I said. "You're the boss. Jami! Just sit still there, laddie." I called out calmly. Jamison froze like a cat watching a mouse hole, with every muscle ready to pounce.

"I have been told you are finishing up the project." Ratterman growled. "You have been busy little bees and are about a year away from using your device, but you still don't have an offensive system yet. You have been working, but it is not fast enough," Ratterman grinned evilly. "You may be able to plug the space/time holes, but they are still coming, and they will be here in 6 years and there is not a thing that you, or your government, or this world, with all its imaginary power, will be able to do about it!" He smirked at me, his eyes flashing like a cobra ready to strike.

I leaned back, pushing my chair out just far enough to be out of the line of fire of the window with the upper half of my body obscured behind the supporting wall that had sheet rock and some kind of wood siding on the outer facade. Nothing that would stop a supersonic high-powered bullet from outside. A fact I was painfully aware of. But right now, Simon Ratterman was the direct threat.

"Nothing to say, bright boy!" Simon spat, leering at me.

"What does it feel like to be a traitor to your people, your race and your whole planet? A scumbag like you makes Judas Iscariot look like a grade school snitch," I said, glaring at him.

"Call it what you want. I cut a good deal. I live like a king where no one can get to me. I've put up with your meddling long enough. I finally decided to end this and it was nothing for me to lure you out and finish the job. It may not stop that useless, idiotic little program of yours, but so what? I will be beyond the rift and when someone after you finally does figure out how to seal it up, if they can, it won't matter. I will be coming at the head of their fleet that will 'eat' this nasty little planet," he expelled a dry, horrid laugh. "I am a prince on their world, with power, authority and glory, beyond your simple understanding. I can come and go as I please, using my device. A device I stole from that stupid father of yours, giving me access to all of time itself. They want the technology, but until I control this planet I have refused to give it to them. They can't use the holes and rips in time/space like the Grays or Nordics. They don't understand it, but the Alpha Draconians are savage warriors and they are mine to control." He was clearly dangerously insane, around the bend and on some kind of power trip I could not even imagine.

"That was why Ann Corbett came to see my dad. You killed my father, didn't you? Just to get your hands on the device?"

"No. I never had the pleasure! He was already gone. I would love to have killed him, but he ran away after Ann talked to him. He was always running away. He left the project just as we almost finished the first phase. He ran away from your mother and then he ran away and left you. Like the sniveling coward he always was. He was very good at running away." Simon's eyes darted quickly around the room and then he focused all his hatred back on me, like a coiled desert rattler, ready to strike from out of the dirt and dust and sands of time.

"So, you think by killing me you can slow the project down?" I asked, taking a cautious sip of my coffee, trying to steady my nerves and give some outward appearance of calm.

"Cut the head off the snake and it dies! With you gone, I can get into some other places before that asinine system of yours comes online and change some opinions. We almost did it before, but then you went and killed Nakamura." He hissed.

"Let me tell you a little secret." I leaned in close to him. "It's complete. And fully operational. So is the offensive system. All nicely rolled up and ready to blast your scaly pals back into whatever cosmic sewer they crawled out of." I laughed.

"Boss, I wouldn't be telling him that." Jamison was right on the mark again, being my straight man. What would re-enforce the fact more than him telling me not to speak?

"You lie! You both lie!" Simon screamed, his eyes darting back and forth between us like a trapped rat. The people in the diner looked over at us, all going quiet. "You couldn't! You didn't know how! I gave you all

the wrong information!" Simon's eyes were rolling in his head with anger and his face reddened with rage, but then he collected himself and found his resolve. Here we go, I thought.

"It's over, Simon. This whole place is surrounded." I said. "There's nowhere left to run. You are out of time."

Ratterman grinned. "What do you know of time, boy?" He screamed, foam coming out of the side of his mouth. "I come from the future where your death is already history!"

In one fluid movement, he stood up, kicking the chair back behind him, and brought the gun to bear, level with my chest at point blank range, less than six feet away.

Jamison pounced, springing at Ratterman with a feral, guttural roar. The plate glass window shattered, and the force of the sniper bullet literally plucked him out of the air, altering his trajectory like a child punching at a balloon. A spray of bullets filled his body, exploding like blossoming roses of flesh and visera, as Jamison twitched in death on the floor.

"Good-Bye, Doctor Humphrey!"

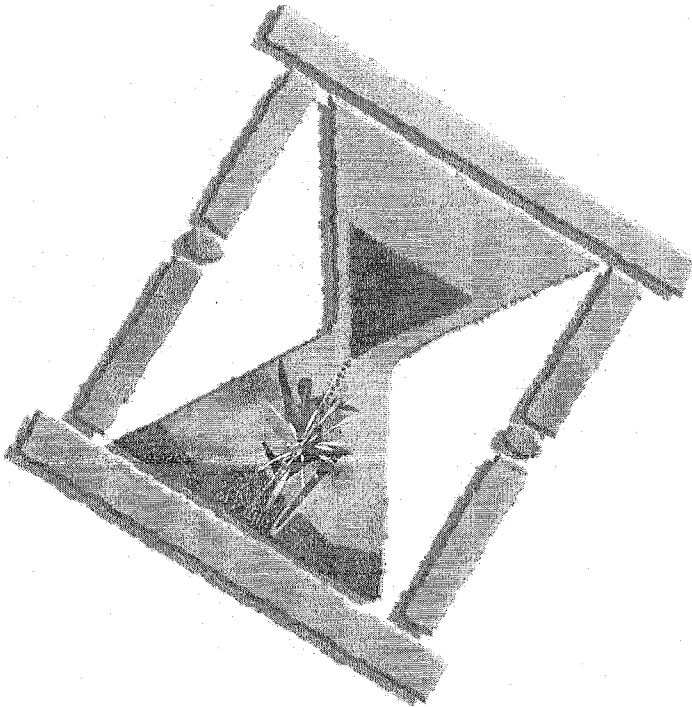
I dove towards him. Ratterman pulled the trigger, again and again and again, putting five bullets in my chest, in a tight grouping right through my heart. The force of the blast knocked me up and off my feet, throwing me against the wall with the shuddering force of getting hit by a bus, breaking most of my ribs.

I hung in space against the wall, somehow keeping my feet under me, motionless for a moment, clutching at my heart in shock, my life spurting through my fingers. I looked up through a red hazy mist, and saw Ratterman smiling with savage victory. He turned towards the shattered window laughing maniacally. He lit up like a Christmas tree with red laser sights all finding targets on his body. From a muffled, far away distance, I heard men yelling commands at him, interrupted by their screams as Ann Corbett opened fire, picking them off one by one, in a rapid fire succession.

Ratterman let the gun fall carelessly from his hand and reached for a device on his belt. I began to slide slowly down the wall as my shattered heart finally gave up the fight.

Stewart's Diner exploded in a rain of bullets and blood as Simon Ratterman, still gloating and laughing triumphantly, just shimmered out of existence, like a grain flowing down the waist of an hourglass, caught up in the sands of time.

I saw all this as my own life slipped away with a brilliant flash and the sound of a choir of celestial angelic voices as I traveled down a tube of warm, loving light.



CHAPTER 51

~EPILOUGE~

A nice young man was behind the counter, obviously Stewart, a big man in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts, joking with one of the customers at the bar.

"Have a seat." Stewart hollered over at me, gesturing to the now clean, empty table. He waved at the waitress and she scurried over and handed me a menu.

"We got a special on the Deli Delight today, ham and cheese grilled with cabbage."

"Coffee, black." I said to her as I sat at the table with a weird ringing in my ears. Stewart came over with steaming coffee in a generously sized heavy bottomed black ceramic mug with the Stewart's logo in gold letters emblazoned on both sides.

"How are you, partner?" Stewart said, setting the coffee down. "Sure you don't want something else?"

I shook my head and put some Sweet & Low into my cup and stirred it. I shook my head and put some Sweet & Low...into my cup...and stirred ...

Wait! What? A feeling of *Deja vu* hit me like a hammer. There was a twisting in the pit of my stomach and my vision tunneled as I felt a spasm of vertigo spinning my head as the diner tilted under me.

I went back to my coffee and saw Jamison focus and stiffen. Still dizzy and desperately trying to focus I spun around. Standing in the shadows, just behind the boisterous group at the door, I made out the burning, baleful eyes of Simon Ratterman. Just as before he pushed his way through the group; the woman in the red dress, the girl with the red and gold scarf and hat, bumping into a man in a hound's tooth hat and checkered coat and shoving past the man in the plaid jacket and the red haired bearded man in the Seattle Seahawks sweatshirt. The rat faced Nazi with the hotly gleaming beady eyes, silently slid into the chair across from me.

"No Ann Corbett, Simon? Sweet young thing that she is! Thought she went everywhere with you? Losing your touch with the ladies?"

"Shut up!" Ratterman hissed. "She's across the street, her finger on the trigger of a high-powered sniper rifle with that ape of yours behind me in the cross-hairs. If he so much as breathes hard she's going to put a .50 caliber slug through his head."

Ratterman pulled a .38 Colt Cobra revolver from his jacket.

"It's okay. You're the boss. Jami! Just sit still there, laddie."

"I've been told you're finishing up the project. You've been busy little bees and are about a year away from using your device, but you still don't have an offensive system yet. You've been working, but it is not fast enough. You may be able to plug the space/time holes, but they're still coming, and they will be here in six years and there is not a thing that you, or your government, or this world, with all its imaginary power, will be able to do about it. Nothing to say, bright boy!" Simon spat, leering at me.

"What does it feel like to be a traitor to your people, your race and your whole planet? A scumbag like you makes Judas Iscariot look like a grade school snitch." I said, glaring at him.

"Call it what you want. I cut a good deal. I live like a king where no one can get to me. I've put up with your meddling long enough. I finally decided to end this and it was nothing for me to lure you out to finish the job. It may not stop that useless, idiotic little program of yours, but so what? I will be beyond the rift and when someone after you finally does

figure out how to seal it up, if they can, it won't matter. I will be coming at the head of their fleet that will 'eat' this nasty little planet." He expelled a dry, horrid laugh. "I am a prince in their world, with power, authority and glory, beyond your simple understanding. I can come and go as I please, using my device. A device I stole from that stupid father of yours, giving me access to all of time itself. They want the technology, but until I control this planet I have refused to give it to them. They can't use the holes and rips in time/space like the Grays or Nordics. They don't understand it, but the Alpha Draconians are savage warriors and they are mine to control."

"That was why Ann Corbett came to see my dad. You killed my father, didn't you? Just to get your hands on the device?"

"No. I never had the pleasure! He was already gone. I would have loved to have killed him, but he ran away after Ann talked to him. He was always running away. He left the project just as we almost finished the first phase. He ran away from your mother and then he ran away and left you. Like the sniveling coward he always was. He was very good at running away."

"So, you think by killing me you can stop the project?" I asked, but now I was seriously freaking out. My vision was blurring, and I saw a sparkling refraction around all the lights in the diner, I felt like I was going to vomit, and that I was trapped in the re-run of a TV show I had seen before, but reality went on as it had before. Something important had changed. But...*what?*

"Cut the off the serpent's head and it dies! With you gone, I can get into some other places before that asinine system of yours comes online and change some opinions. We almost did it before, but then you went and killed Nakamura." He hissed.

"Let me tell you a little secret, Simon." I leaned forward. "It's complete, and fully operational. So is the offensive system. All nicely rolled up and ready to blast your scaly pals back into the cosmic sewer they crawled out of."

"Boss, don't tell him that!" Jamison said.

"You lie! You both lie!" Simon screamed, his eyes darting back and forth between us like a trapped rat. The people in the diner looked over at us, all going quiet. "You couldn't! You didn't know how! I gave you all the wrong information!"

"It's over, Simon. This whole place is surrounded. There's nowhere left to run. You are out of time."

"I come from the future where your death is already history!" He screamed, foam coming out the side of his mouth. "What do you know of time, boy?"

Suddenly, I felt a jolting shock run through my body like a bolt of electricity. It was like I was riding a train that had just, miraculously, jumped the tracks, and landed on another line and course altogether.

"I know a great deal about time."

The deep, resonant voice came from a man in a hound's tooth hat and checkered coat, sitting by the window with his back to us.

"YOU!"

Ratterman's eyes went wide with stunned shock and terror. He pulled his gun up from under the table in panic. As he got up, I threw my mug of boiling hot coffee in his face. He screeched in blistering pain. His left hand went up to his face as his gun hand came down on the table to brace himself from falling backwards.

With all my might, fueled by a rage seething for years finally being released, I slammed the heavy coffee mug down on his hand and he screamed, jumping up clutching his bloody, broken, twisted fingers, the gun and his chair clattering to the tiled floor behind him.

In one fluid graceful motion, the man in the hound's tooth hat whirled around into the center of the room, a silver .45 Colt automatic in his outstretched fist. He stopped his arc of motion and took aim.

Ratterman clutched his broken hand, growling in pain.

"This world is still doomed! Nothing can stop me! I have all of time and space to deal with you!" Ratterman laughed manically, and reached for a space on his belt under his coat. But then his hands moved faster, in panic, as he looked down, clearly checking for something he had lost.

"Looking for this, Simon?" The man held up a blinking black box with a red dial.

The Nazi let out a guttural scream and lunged at him. The tall, thin man fired point blank, right into Simon Ratterman's chest. He was hurled backwards and lifted off his feet by the force of the shots, crashing through the plate glass diner window in a blizzard of glistening rainbow shards, coming to rest with a sickening thud on the sidewalk as the tinkling glass rained down like colored hail, the breath leaving his body in a muffled howl.

"GET DOWN!" Jamison yelled as he pounced like a panther, leaping across the room, tackling the man in the hat, slamming him to the floor and landing atop him with a dull thump. I flipped the table towards the window and crouched behind it, waiting for the hail of bullets from Ann Corbett's sniper rifle. All the patrons clove under the tables. Jamison had his weapon pushed into the thin man's temple, waiting.

The silence was deafening. Through the ringing in my ears, I heard men in the distance giving orders, moving into position around our location, closing in.

Seeing there was no further fire, with his gun glued to the side of his head, Jamison yanked the lanky man to his feet by the scruff of his neck and slammed him face first against the far wall, out of the line of fire of the window. His hound's tooth hat fluttered to the ground as he raised his hands in surrender.

"Who the hell are you?" Jamison yelled, adrenaline racing through his system. He gave the man a rattling shake. "I said, who the fuck are you?" He screamed at the back of his head. I got up and picked up the old, well-worn hound's tooth hat I knew so well, as realization dawned.

"Jamison! Jami!" I said putting my hand on his gun, pulling it away from the man's head, and pointing it down at the floor.

"He's my dad."

With a stunned look, Jamison relaxed his grip and Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Senior, slowly turned around.

Jamison's eyes bulged. His jaw went slack as he chewed the air in shock trying to form a word. He looked incredulously from my older face, into the younger handsome face of my father, recognizing the family resemblance but just not believing it.

My father had not aged a day since the last time I saw him when I was 17 years old, when he put on that oversized checkered coat and his favorite old hat and walked off into that long, dark night.

"He can't be!" Jamison sputtered, his accent heavier than I had ever heard it. "He's got to be fifteen years younger than you!"

"Hi Teddy." My dad looked at me and smiled. Jamison relaxed his grip and my father gave me a hug that I had literally been waiting for all my life. Neither of us wanted to let go. But our reunion was broken up when seven or eight men hit the front door and crashed into the room. Jamison barked some orders and they cleared the scared but unharmed patrons out of the diner and into the street. They dealt with the scene outside and surrounded the building, leaving us alone.

"What happened to Ann Corbett?" I said, still half expecting to get sniped through the window.

"I took care of her over on the roof across the street, but she escaped. I'm sorry. I managed to get the gun away from her before she 'jumped' away. They should be able to at least lift her fingerprints off it, if that matters."

"But how did you get Ratterman's time device?"

"I got a good look at it on Corbett's belt before she vanished. Then I bumped into Simon at the door and picked his pocket." He held up the blinking box. He saw my stunned look and smiled. "I wasn't always a scientist, son."

He held up a finger, then walked over to the table where he had been sitting, and pulled an old style canvas and leather backpack up off the

floor. The buckles strained to contain its contents. He took it over and put it on the counter with a loud thump. He undid the buckles and pulled out a heavy black object, with lights and dials, about the size of a hatbox. He took out the hand-held device and compared them. I could see right away it was the first model prototype of the man portable Time Runner he had built in his lab, next to an ancestor of his device, several generations down the lineage.

"Fascinating how they've managed to miniaturize the components." He mused, still the eternal scientist. "The power supply must still be a real challenge, though. They obviously have multiple jump capabilities..." He rubbed his chin, and I could tell he wanted to take everything apart right then and there. That was my dad. Off in a world all his own, even after all this time.

I walked back behind the counter, pulled out three ice-cold bottles of beer, and handed one to each man. Jamison grabbed his like a drowning man, still in shock.

"To my dad!" I toasted. "Who has always been my hero!"

"Bloody hell!" Jamison exclaimed as he polished the beer in one long gulp.

I took two long pulls, my throat so dry from fear I couldn't believe it.

"This was the only place where you could drag that rat out of his hole in the rift he's been hiding in all these years." I had worked the numbers in my head. "You needed to get him out in the open, is that it?"

"Had a little help." He smiled at me.

"You're not bloody kidding me, are you?" Jamison was still trying to catch up, jerking his head back and forth between the two of us so hard I thought he would sprain his neck.

"Nope." I said. "Grandfather's paradox in action. Couldn't go back in time and kill him, otherwise everything would be messed up in the future. All of this..." I pointed to Ratterman's body on the street as I heard sirens wailing in the distance, "would not have happened. So you had to go forward to nail him here, when he came back. The only time he was actually in phase and in the flesh, as he would have to be to actually kill me. You cut it pretty close there, dad."

He shook his head. "I jumped ahead realizing he had killed you and I couldn't let that happen. So I had to jump back to the exact moment it happened. The power supply on my device is only good for two jumps, out and back. So I had to decide where to jump back to. Since you were at the eye of the timeline shift you may experience some pretty disorienting *deja vu*. Sorry about that."

I looked over at the wall where I had just died, felt a pain in my chest, and remembered beautiful voices and a brilliant flash and the loving tunnel of light.

"Did-did ... was I just shot. ... dead?" I said, feeling flashes of what, I thought, had just happened, but then ... didn't. ...

My father looked pained. "Yes. But you'll find the memory fades as the timeline resets and readjusts itself. Fluid quantum time in the right-brain eventually reconciles with left-brain linear time. We are remarkable that way."

Dr. Ted Humphrey, Sr., took a long breath and then shifted gears to lighten the mood. "You know you're an old man?" He looked at me and reached up to pull a piece of glass out of my hair.

"It happens when you just have a normal life, living in only one direction," I laughed and turned to Jamison, who seemed to have some glimmer of understanding of the situation now.

"You too, Jami. You have a lot to be grateful for. Just enjoy life from now on and be glad you're alive!" I thumped him on the back.

"Wait!" Jamison said with utter bafflement, having a nightmare *deja vu* as well. "Was I..?"

"Yes," my dad said. "You were killed as well. Shot dead by Ann Corbett. But history, as the great inventor Henry Ford once said," he raised his bottle, "is bunk!"

"To history not being all it's cracked up to be!" I toasted, and we finished our beers.

Jamison just worked his jaw, still confused. I hooked my thumb toward the door to snap him out of it. "Jami, make yourself useful. Go talk to the fuzz. Call a clean-up team out from Bangor and have them get rid of the body. Tell the cops it's a matter of National Security, but don't scare them too badly. No need to make a huge fuss."

"Right you are, boss. No fuss. Roger that." His mind snapped back to a set of tasks he could understand. He looked at my dad and gave him an old school British open palm salute. "An honor to meet you, sir. I am very proud to be of service to your son. He is a great man."

"You do not know the half of it," he smiled proudly. "And, thank you. I know that." He sat down and I joined him as Jamison went out to deal with the local constabulary and give orders that we were to be left alone.

"What now?" I said thinking about my past and his future and what he could do from this point in the timeline both forward and backward.

"My device is kaput. I had enough power for the two jumps. The jump back here turned the innards to slag." My dad said, looking lost and confused.

"You can't go back." I said at long last, trying to gauge all the possibilities. "I sure as hell don't want to wake up tomorrow and be seventeen again living in Barstow. So," I tried to work it through again and it was literally making my skull ache. Exasperated, I just threw up my

hands in frustration. "You can't go back," I said with finality. "You know that?" I looked at him.

"Yes, Teddy. I know." He looked in my eyes for a long time, taking in my graying hair and the age lines on my haggard face. "I knew that when I left...last night."

It just then hit me. Oh my God! This was literally only tomorrow for him since I'd seen him last. He'd met Ann Corbett, discovered what they had planned, and gave up all his work and hopes and dreams and aspirations, he unselfishly gave up everything in his life...to save mine. Tears welled up in my eyes. All those years of hate and anger and resentment at him for abandoning me, for him not loving me, all washed away by revelations of him being here with me now.

My father smiled sadly and shook his head. "No. I'm hoping to find an old friend that left a few years before me. You wouldn't know him, but he, was a great man that taught me a lot."

"Will this slow them down? I mean from coming to Earth?" I asked him and he just shook his head, confused. He obviously didn't know what I was talking about. He threw up his hands.

"Ted, I am truly sorry that I don't have any answers to your questions. You've lived forty years of life, filling in all the blanks. Like I said, I left last night. To me you should still be in high school playing football and, instead, I find you an old...well, older, man. But at least now you're alive. It's as confusing as anything to me, but if I can find my old friend, I think he can explain a lot of it to me." He got up and looked around the ruins of the restaurant.

"You mean Dr. Rufus T. Henry?" I asked.

He turned in amazement. "You know Rufus?"

"I certainly do. I owe everything in my life to him, and to... you. But you'll know more about all of that when you get to where I think you're going. Let me give you some prophecy dad you find Rufus, you go much further ahead in time, and things work out pretty well for the two of you. And for all of us, back here in the past."

He went to the counter and stuffed the Time Runner back in his pack and slung it over his shoulder. I got up and took him by the arm. We walked out the back door, getting out of the area before the local cops showed up. Two men from my security team fell in discreetly behind us, machine guns at the ready, watching every angle.

I looked off at the pier in the distance, and the gouts of fog magically parted and I saw a man standing there with a fishing pole in his hand and a white bucket set down at his side. He looked over smiling and waved. I waved back.

"In fact, I think you will find the good Doctor Rufus T. Henry right over there, fishing." I took my father by the shoulders and held him, gazing into his eyes.

"I hated you when I was young. And now... I love you with all my heart. You may never understand, but that doesn't matter. I know we meet again. One day soon... dad." The words caught in my throat.

"I am so sorry I wasn't there for you, Ted. I wanted to be so badly, but I provided for you as best I could and I knew how important your life was going to be, and I would have done anything to save my...son." My dad had tears in his eyes, and I lost it and started to cry, too.

"You have always been there for me dad! We have never been apart." I held him and then let go." You will learn that. Very soon."

We hugged. He put his hound's tooth hat on my head, then walked towards the pier. He stopped and turned, holding up the small black box Time Runner. "Oh! And I am sorry I can't leave these with you, but you will get there eventually." He put it back in his pocket, and walked away as the fog swirled around him, caressing him like an angel's wing..

He saw Rufus and threw his arms out wide in surprise and started to jog toward him, like a kid seeing a long lost best friend. The two men shook hands and patted each other on the back. They began a happy, animated conversation, between two men from a different, nobler age and from the same time and place.

A police officer came running down the street and pointed his finger at the figures walking down the pier into the fog. "Hey! I need to speak with that man."

"Not unless you got an order from the President of the United States or from me." I held up my ID, as my security men flanked him, and the officer quickly backed off, with my lads herding him back in the direction from whence he came.

I watched the two men, still talking happily, get into a boat and motor off south into the bay. I stood looking after them until they were well out of sight disappearing like wraiths into the fog.

I walked back up to where Jamison was finishing up as they were carting off the body of Simon Ratterman for immediate disposal. I went to the gurney and flipped back the sheet to see the dead, glassy eyed face, twisted and frozen in the shock and pain of a violent death, a huge bloody hole over his heart. I stood there, not wanting to forget that moment. My own personal demon who had tortured and terrorized me, and everyone I loved, my entire life, now just a lifeless lump of meat. But Anne Corbett, Lilith to his Lucifer, was still out there, loose in time and space, and she was going to want her revenge. I would worry about that. ..tomorrow.

"Seems too easy, considerin' what he's done." Jamison said.

"Feed him to a pack of Dogs. Then maybe then this traitor will amount to a pile of shit." I said darkly as I flicked the sheet back over his face and motioned to the men to take him away. We watched as he was loaded into the back of the van.

"Ann Corbett is still out there." Jamison looked at me. "She could be in the future or the past. So does this mean any of this is over?"

"For right now it is. But no one ever knows what the future has in store. Okay, I guess some people do. Guess we have to remember that our today is always someone else's yesterday." I laughed and headed for the car. "Or our present is their past, or our tomorrow is their yesterday...Ah, hell!" I said grabbing my head. "No matter where you go, there you are!"

We laughed as we both climbed in the car.

"Nice hat." Jami said. "Where to Boss? Back to Bangor?"

"No, my friend. How about we go get into that giant airplane the taxpayers have so generously given us, pop a 20 year old bottle of Scotch and head to my bunny ranch. Would you like to have dinner with the two most beautiful women on Earth? My wife and daughter. Could you use a good home cooked meal, Mr. Jamison?"

"That I could, sir!" He grimaced. "My sandwich was terrible! How does that whanker stay in business with pastrami that bad?"

"Good! Because after tomorrow's experiment, I plan to have a lot of dinners at home and it is okay with me if you are at the table with us every night."

"It seems you and your dad had a lot to talk about, and didn't." Jami said starting the car.

"Too much to talk about in too little time, Jami. He and I both knew that. We couldn't fill in all those blanks. I knew he was moving ahead, so anything I told him now would alter any actions he took in the future, which might change how things turned out tonight. So, I will just remember him the way he was the night he left and he will remember me as the young man I was then. Rufus will explain it all. He already has, I'm sure. For my dad, all of this was just a day and a night. Only hours passed since I saw him last, but years have passed for me and during that period I'm sure he is well aware. of everything. Time moves differently than anyone can even imagine." I sat back and pushed the hat down over my eyes. "Every now and then I keep thinking I'm going to wake up in a classroom in Barstow and that this has all been just a bad dream."

"It's no dream, Ted," Jamison said stoutly. "It's the business we do, and, as of today, I would say that all three Dr. Humphrey's are the best at it there has ever been, or will be." He put the red light on the roof and drove up the street.

We headed south for the airport. The test would go on just fine tomorrow, I knew that now. I also knew the Bug Zapper would work perfectly as well.

Right now I wanted to see how all my furry little rabbits were doing and if I could learn to sleep in my own bed again next to the woman I truly loved, down the hall from the daughter I adored.

Tempus Fugit. Time flies.

But tomorrow would be another day.